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# Critical Approaches To Narrative Trajectories In 21st Century Spanish Novels By Women

Colleen Grant

Wayne State University, [colleen.mcnew@gmail.com](mailto:colleen.mcnew@gmail.com)

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**CRITICAL APPROACHES TO NARRATIVE TRAJECTORIES IN 21<sup>st</sup>  
CENTURY SPANISH NOVELS BY WOMEN**

by

**COLLEEN GRANT**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2019

MAJOR: MODERN LANGUAGES

Approved By:

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Advisor

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Date

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## **DEDICATION**

To my parents for their many years of support and countless hours of babysitting, and to my husband for allowing me to focus exclusively on my work – thank you.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to extend my sincerest gratitude to all the members of my committee, Dr. Francisco J. Higuero, Dr. José Rico-Ferrer, Dr. Elena Past, and Dr. Robert Holley, as well as Graduate Director, Dr. Michael Joseph Giordano, for their unwavering support, patience, and council throughout this process. I would also like to say a special thank you to Dr. Elena Past, whose friendship, encouragement, and countless hours of intellectual conversation have helped me more than she could know.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation aims to uncover from a critical perspective the ways in which several concepts are presented in three 21<sup>st</sup> century Spanish narratives written by women that have largely remained understudied by scholars: *Secreta Penélope* by Alicia Giménez Bartlett, *Mi vida según Martín* by Sara Barrena, and *Violetas para Olivia* by Julia Montejo. Following this introductory chapter, each novel will be examined individually before exploring the significance of all three novels together.

The investigation will begin by seeking to answer the following question: What are the main elements of the narratives, and how do these elements come together to produce meaning? In other words, it will begin with a narratological examination of the form and function of the narratives because, as Gerald Prince explains, “To study the nature of all and only possible narratives...is to study one of the fundamental ways – and singularly human one at that – in which we make sense” (*Narratology* 164).

Most narratological investigations begin with a distinction between the story and the discourse of the text, the story being the actual content of the narrative and the discourse being the structure.<sup>1</sup> This work will examine the roles of the narrators and the narratees in each text. When approaching any narrative, the narratee is fully reliant upon the narrator, or the one who tells the story, for the information he or she receives. Therefore, the type of narrator and his or her role in the story has a large effect on how the narratee perceives the information. Another important factor that can affect the interpretation and meaning of a text is the one to whom the narrator is addressing the story, or the narratee. At times, the narratee may serve as a character in the novel, in

which case both the narrator and the narratee may be affected by his or her response to the story. In other cases, the narratee may simply be implied in the act of narrating without serving any other purpose than to receive the story.<sup>2</sup>

In *Secreta Penélope*, one encounters a homodiegetic narrator, which Prince defines in theoretical terms as “...a narrator who is a character in the situations and events s/he recounts” (*Dictionary* 41), who is conscious of her role as narrator.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to examine the effect of the narrator’s intrusiveness, self-consciousness, reliability, and distance on the narratee’s interpretation of the narrative.

*Mi vida según Martín*, on the other hand, represents an autodiegetic narrative, or “A first-person narrative the narrator of which is also the protagonist or the hero” (*Dictionary* Prince 9).<sup>4</sup> In this case, the main character’s goal is actually the act of narrating itself, the search for someone to whom she can tell her story and the language with which to do it.<sup>5</sup> As such, her storytelling raises a number of uncertainties, questions, and tensions regarding the main character’s goals.

Finally, in *Violetas para Olivia*, the narrator is a heterodiegetic, omniscient narrator, or “...a narrator who is not a character in the situations and events s/he recounts, (*Dictionary* Prince 40) and “...who knows (practically) everything about the situations and events recounted” (*Dictionary* Prince 68). This type of narrator allows the narrative to employ what is perhaps one of its most notable features, which is discordance between the order of the story and the order of the discourse.

The analysis of the discourse will be based primarily on Gérard Genette’s theory of discourse order in his book *Narrative Discourse*. According to Genette, “To study the

temporal order of a narrative is to compare the order in which events or temporal sections are arranged in the narrative discourse with the order of succession these same events or temporal segments have in the story..." (35). Essentially, the order in which certain events are narrated does not always correspond to the order in which they occur, and this change in chronology may affect both meaning within the text and the meaning attributed to the text. Such discordances in the story order and discourse order are what Genette refers to as anachronies. This work will explore how such anachronies function within the narratives and how they affect the diegetic discourse.

Since the main character, Sara, in *Secreta Penélope* is absent from the present moment of the story as a result of her suicide, the discourse relies on prolonged anachronies to provide the narratee with the necessary details of the protagonist's life. In *Mi vida según Martín*, the narrator tells the story of her life by alternating between descriptions of her past and the present-day correspondence she maintains with the narratee. Anachronies feature most prominently in *Violetas para Olivia*, where the narrative shifts continuously from the present moment to what appear to be past moments spanning from 1938 and various years in between.

In analyzing these three narratives, one finds that meaning cannot be constructed merely based on what is present. There are a number of notable absences from the texts, as well, which all contribute to the creation of meaning. It is here that a deconstructive reading of the works based on Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance* is essential. According to Derrida, "...one puts into question the authority of presence, or of its simple symmetrical opposite, absence, or lack. Thus one questions the limit that has always



constrained us, still constrains us...to formulate the meaning of Being in general as presence or absence, in the categories of being or beingness...” (62). In other words, meaning is not constructed in terms of presence or absence, but rather in terms of presence *and* absence. This work will explore the ways in which meaning is constructed both in the narrative and for the reader based not only on what is present, but also on what is absent.<sup>6</sup>

As mentioned above, Sara is absent from the present moment of the story in *Secreta Penélope*. The narrator therefore uses writing in order to create her presence. However, as will be discussed further, all writing in itself implies absence, thus complicating the overall meaning of the narrative.<sup>7</sup>

In *Mi vida según Martín*, the narrator tries to construct the meaning of her own being precisely in terms of both presence and absence. The most notable absence is what she describes as the “falta de palabras,” or lack of words, that plagues her throughout her entire life. As we will see, the narrator, Violeta, also comes to rely on writing as her preferred method of communication. This raises significant questions not only regarding writing and absence, but also about language, presence, and absence.

From the very beginning of *Violetas para Olivia*, one notes that nearly all of the main character’s family is physically absent from the present time of the narrative. It is precisely these absences that inspire her to explore her past in hopes of discovering the truth about what really happened to her family. However, although they are physically absent, one will discover that her family is still very much present throughout the discourse of the narrative.

Moving into an even deeper examination of the narratives, this work will investigate the ways in which the characters try to construct their own identities according to – and at times differently from – traditional psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity. Many are familiar with Sigmund Freud’s structure of the unconscious as the id, ego, and superego. While this serves as a basic foundation for most of the subsequent psychoanalytic theorists, including the ones used here, this analysis will rely primarily on the theories of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. For Lacan, the self is constructed across three orders similar to those of Freud: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The imaginary, which can loosely be compared to Freud’s conception of the id, is categorized by desire and instinct. The symbolic is that which regulates the imaginary, much like the superego; it is the order of language, of laws, and structure. Kristeva follows Lacan’s three orders, yet she renames the imaginary as the semiotic.<sup>8</sup> In Kristeva’s constitution of the subject, the semiotic again represents desire and instincts and the symbolic is the law that regulates that desire, yet she goes a step further. The semiotic, she argues, represents the body, the material, the feminine, while the symbolic is the male-dominated law that imposes itself on the semiotic.<sup>9</sup>

However, as one will see, the traditional psychoanalytic construction of the subject as proposed by both Freud and Lacan is not always sufficient, nor is it always appropriate, to explain the actual construction of the subject. It is here that the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari will be useful to at once criticize the traditional model and offer an alternative construction of identity. While Freud and Lacan both emphasize the negative role of desire and the necessity of regulating and curbing it, Deleuze and

Guattari offer a more positive conception of desire in *Anti-Oedipus*, and claim that the repression of desire is merely the result of societal pressure. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they present a more thorough explanation of their concepts of the nomad and becoming to call for an identity that embraces difference, an identity that is multiple, an identity that is always in process, never constrained by having *become*.<sup>10</sup>

When taken together, these three texts represent a progression from the errors and ineffectiveness of the traditional psychoanalytic construction of the subject, to an alternative construction of the subjective, to finally, the need to correct the errors of the past in order to arrive at a positive construction of the subject. In both *Secreta Penélope* and *Mi vida según Martín*, the main characters find themselves in a struggle between the imaginary and the symbolic. In the former, Sara has spent her life existing in the imaginary stage without any concern for society's rules. She shows no desire to transition into the symbolic, yet her friends and the psychoanalysts who hope for her to do so. Ultimately, her death seems to come as a result of her inability to cope with the symbolic. In the latter, Violeta strives to fully exist in the symbolic order, while at the same time refusing to be defined by either the imaginary or the symbolic. Rather, she seems to be searching for a way in which she can exist in both, or perhaps seeking another way through the traditional binary of imaginary versus symbolic. In *Violetas para Olivia*, Madelaine's search for some kind of identity requires her to first reexamine, and, in a way, correct the formerly constructed identities of her ancestors in the past before she can finally affirm her own subjectivity in the present.

The final chapter will approach the narratives from a phenomenological and hermeneutic viewpoint. Phenomenology, which studies the treatment of experience, will be used to explore the intertextual significance of the three narratives and the ways in which they come together to represent certain aspects of human experience. Paul Ricoeur's theories on narrative and selfhood, time, memory and history will be utilized extensively to study the structure of the main characters' experiences throughout the narratives. According to Ricoeur, the conception of time as an arrow, always traveling in one direction, is an insufficient explanation of the actual experience of time.<sup>11</sup> Human beings are constantly affected by the past, by the history that has been recorded by others, by their own subjective memories. It is not only within the narratives that one finds evidence of the past affecting and at times changing the present, it can also be found in the experience of reading the narratives.

In addition, the novels will also be examined from a postmodern viewpoint in an attempt to demonstrate the ways in which the traditional dichotomies of, for example, mind/body, presence/absence, language/reality are deconstructed. All three narratives call for a reformulation of how subjectivity and identity are defined. Through such an examination, one begins to see the dangers of subjectivity that is centered on these traditional binary oppositions as well as the ways in which modern women are beginning to deconstruct these dichotomies.

After exposing the issues of the patriarchal, logocentric definitions of subjectivity in *Secreta Penélope*, one begins to see a new, redefinition of subjectivity emerge in both *Mi vida según Martín* and *Violetas para Olivia*. It is a more embodied, multiple, and

positive definition of subjectivity. As Rosi Braidotti explains in her book, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*:

The starting point for most feminist redefinitions of subjectivity is a new form of materialism that develops the notion of the corporeal by emphasizing the embodied and therefore sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject. Consequently, rethinking the bodily roots of subjectivity is the starting point for the epistemological project of nomadism. The body or the embodiment of the subject is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category, but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological (24-25).

Violeta, in *Mi vida según Martín*, must realize that language does not need to be separated from embodied reality. Eventually, she is able to move beyond the excessive power she has granted words and language in determining her own subjectivity through performativity and embodiment of communication through sign language. In *Violetas para Olivia*, Madelaine's reconstruction of subjectivity is entirely dependent upon her embodied experiences in both space and time.

Looking at the significance of these three narratives written by women in twenty first century Spain, it is essential to recognize the contrast between macrohistory and microhistory.<sup>12</sup> István M. Szijártó offers a basic definition of microhistory in his book, *What is Microhistory? : Theory and Practice*, stating that:

Microhistorians hold a microscope and not a telescope in their hands. Focusing on certain cases, persons and circumstances, microhistory allows an intensive historical study of the subject, giving a completely different picture of the past from the investigations about nations, states, or social groupings, stretching over decades, centuries, or whatever *longue durée* (4-5).

In other words, rather than looking at major historical figures or events, microhistory examines the smaller groups or individuals that are traditionally left out of macrohistory.

Given the turbulent nature of Spain's recent past, it comes as no surprise that many narratives focus strongly on the macrohistorical significance of such events. As Anne Walsh states in the introduction to the book, *Telling Tales: Storytelling in Contemporary Spain*:

It is undeniable that the predominant themes to be found in both historical texts and narrative fictions in Spain during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have much to do with the past, particularly Spain's recent history: the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939); the Franco Dictatorship (1939-1975); the Transition to Democracy (1975-1981); Democracy itself (1981+); and the Global Economic Crisis (2008+). All these issues have impacted significantly on the everyday life of Spain's citizens. The narratives emerging show clear evidence of that impact with emphasis on such themes as the significance of memory and remembering the past, the impossibility and instability of such memories, the chaotic nature of life, the place of nation/state in the psyche of the individual with emerging themes investigating the role of solidarity in the empowerment of that individual. The interesting thing is that, as we move away in time from the twentieth century, the themes are becoming less focused on the particular case of Spain and are entering an area where there is room for a broader contemplation of the impact of the environment...on humanity in general (xxi).

This shift away from the particular case of Spain, however, can be seen precisely in these three narratives. There is little to no mention in them of the major issues that dominated Spain's recent past. Rather, each novel centers on individual women, their personal or familial past, and their personal relationships. As such, one finds that while former generations of writers seemed to focus more on the inclusion of women in macrohistory, again with an emphasis on Spain's particular past, this generation tends to focus more on mending the microhistories of women in order to portray their struggles on a more intimate, personal level.

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<sup>1</sup> Seymour Chatman has elaborated between this distinction in *Story and Discourse* and *Coming to terms: the rhetoric of narrative in fiction and film*.

<sup>2</sup> If the narratee is identified by name, then he/she happens to be a character.

<sup>3</sup> Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* is a basic bibliographical reference for anyone interested in the study of narratology.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of protagonist, as used by Prince, should imply the presence of an antagonist, without which a protagonist would not exist.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of character, Prince distinguishes between an actant character, or one who moves the action forward, and an auxiliant character, which does not.

<sup>6</sup> If the emphasis is based on presence, then it should follow a narratological approach. If it is based on absence, it should follow a deconstructive approach.

<sup>7</sup> The exercise of writing, according to a deconstructive approach, is part of what is called grammatology.

<sup>8</sup> Lacan explains the difference between the imaginary and the symbolic in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, as well as in his various seminars.

<sup>9</sup> Kristeva's presents her distinction between the semiotic and symbolic orders in *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

<sup>10</sup> To clarify schizoanalysis, consult *The Two-Fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari* by Charles J. Stivale.

<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur explains his theories of time and narrative in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, as well as in his three volumes titled *Time and Narrative*.

<sup>12</sup> In Spanish cultural studies, macrohistory could be considered history, while microhistory could be considered intrahistory as used frequently by Unamuno in various essays and novels. Other critics often use the phrase authentic tradition in place of intrahistory.

## CHAPTER 2: CREATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF NARRATIVES IN *SECRETA PENÉLOPE*

Of the three authors to be studied throughout this work, Alicia Giménez Bartlett is by far the most prolific. She received a doctoral degree in Spanish Philology from the University of Barcelona and published her first novel, *Exit*, in 1984. It was not until 1996, however, that Giménez Bartlett truly distinguished herself as one of Spain's leading female authors with the publication of *Ritos de muerte* [*Death Rites\**],<sup>1</sup> the first book in her acclaimed Petra Delicado detective series. According to Francisco Javier Higuero, Giménez Bartlett's work can generally be divided into two categories: detective novels and novels "...cuya acción se realiza en ámbitos sociales diferentes de aquellos en que se desenvuelven esos representantes de las fuerzas de orden público" (3) [...whose action takes place in different social environments in which the focus is on those representatives of the power of public order]. *Secreta Penélope* (2003) is the first novel from this second group published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and has gone largely unexamined by critics in spite of its popularity with the public and the large body of research surrounding Giménez Bartlett's previous works.<sup>2</sup>

The story of *Secreta Penélope* is comprised of the narrator's efforts to uncover what led her friend, Sara, down a path of destruction that eventually ends in suicide. In the very first line of the narrative, it is clear that a homodiegetic narrator who is conscious of her role as narrator is telling the story. She states succinctly, "Estoy escribiendo en mi casa" (7) [I'm writing in my house]\*. Gerald Prince explains that, "The intrusiveness of a given narrator, his degree of self-consciousness, his reliability, his distance from the narrated or the narratee not only help characterize him but also affect



our interpretation of and response to the narrative” (*Narratology* 3). This narratological examination will focus specifically on that – the effect of the narrator’s intrusiveness, self-consciousness, reliability, and distance on the narratee’s interpretation of the narrative. The results will uncover a striking level of metafiction that is present throughout the entire novel. In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious*, Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as, “...a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality...such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (2).<sup>3</sup> In *Secreta Penélope*, the narrator demonstrates how narrative can help one subjectively understand his or her own experiences. She also shows how a collage of narratives can come to memorialize a life that is no longer present. As one will discover, however, the use of narrative as memorial comes at a certain cost that does not necessarily ensure a happy ending.

According to Prince, “...such questions as why a narrator decides to relate a series of events, what his narration means to him or comes to mean to him, and what physical shape it takes are often never raised” (*Narratology* 34). In *Secreta Penélope*, however, all of these questions are answered from the start of the narrative. The narrator, who remains nameless, explicitly states that she is writing on the second floor of her house, and through her writing she relates the events that took place leading up to Sara’s suicide, which has already occurred before the start of the story. Thus, she clearly draws attention to the process of narrative creation. Through her narration, the narrator exercises what

Charles S. Peirce refers to as abduction in order to construct a logical explanation of why her friend committed suicide. In her book, *La Razón Creativa*, Sara Barrena explains Peirce's theory of abduction:

La abducción surge cuando algo nos sorprende, cuando nos encontramos confrontados a alguna experiencia contraria a las expectativas que tenemos...

Para Peirce, todo conocimiento tiene su raíz en la experiencia, a través de ella entra el mundo en nosotros y se realiza la apertura de la subjetividad semiótica. Peirce afirma el carácter imprescindible de la experiencia y pone así de manifiesto que no basta los razonamientos lógico-deductivos para el efectivo avance del conocimiento. (84-85).

[Abduction arises when something surprises us, when we find ourselves confronted with an experience contrary to what we expected...For Peirce, all knowledge is based on experience; it is through experience that the world enters into us and the opening of semiotic subjectivity is realized. Peirce affirms the essential role of experience and reveals that logical-deductive reasoning is not enough for the effective advancement of knowledge]\*.

Throughout the narrative trajectory of *Secreta Penélope*, the narrator relies on her own experiences and observations throughout her long friendship with Sara in order to make sense of the unexpected suicide.

Since Sara is absent from the present moment of the story, the discourse must utilize prolonged anachronies, specifically analepses, which Prince defines as "...going back to the past with respect to the 'present' moment" (*Dictionary* 5) in order to provide the narratee with the necessary details of Sara's life. While much of this information comes directly from the narrator's experiences and observations, even she at times admits ignorance of certain significant events and details. As a result, she is often forced to take on the role of narratee and rely on the narrations she receives from other characters in order to relate the moments of Sara's life for which she was not present. The majority of

these narrations, as the narrator explains, come from her and Sara's mutual friends, Berta, Ramona, and Gabriel, as well as from Sara's ex-husband Adrián, her daughter Camila, and Sara herself.

It is important to recognize, however, not only the intentions of all the narrators throughout the story, but also the narrations to which the main narrator acts as narratee before Sara's suicide, and those she receives after Sara is dead. During Sara's life, Berta and Ramona are both determined to help their friend overcome her apparent problems with adapting to 'normal' life. At times, their narrations seem to come as a result of typical gossip that takes place between friends, like when Berta insists to the narrator that Sara is thriving after her marriage. Other times, they use their narrations as a way to vent their frustrations with their mutual friend, like when both Berta and Ramona tell the narrator about Sara's struggles as a mother. And towards the end of Sara's life, the stories they tell the main narrator are all skewed with optimism in order prove that their interventions in Sara's life did not contribute to her downfall and were done with the best intentions. Gabriel, on the other hand, is far less interested in gossip and has primarily avoided any direct intervention in Sara's life. His narrations leave the main narrator wanting in her role as narratee. At one point, after Sara's daughter is born and she is unable to meet the narrator personally to tell her about her life, the narrator is already suspicious of the accounts given to her by Berta and Ramona. She is forced to rely on Gabriel to fill in certain details. She explains:

...insistía en sonsacar a Gabriel para saber cómo se encontraba nuestra amiga, qué pasaba en su casa, cómo la había afectado la maternidad. Pero Gabriel era un cronista muy malo de los hechos cotidianos, y carecía de cualquier gracia para determinar los estados psicológicos de la gente, aún

creo que no los percibía en absoluto. El caso es que me contestaba con vagos lugares, comunes y frases hechas, vacías de cualquier información (142).

[...I insisted on prying out Gabriel to know how our friend was doing, what was happening in her house, how maternity had affected her. But Gabriel was a very bad reporter of quotidian facts, and he lacked any grace to determine the psychological states of people. I still believe he didn't even notice them completely. The fact was he answered me with vague places, and common fixed phrases void of any information]\*.

Essentially, in addition to admitting that there were times in Sara's life when she was too distant from her friend to obtain certain information, the narrator is also explicitly criticizing Gabriel's ability to narrate. Since she feels she cannot rely on Gabriel's poor narrative of Sara's situation, she is forced to eventually reconnect with Sara in order to make her own observations.

Following Sara's suicide, the narrator acts as narratee once again not only for all of their mutual friends, but also for Sara's ex-husband and her daughter. The difference between these narrations and the ones she previously received is that now most of the people to whom she serves as narratee know that she is a writer and suspect her intention to write about Sara's life. As a result, the stories they tell are biased in their own favor. Immediately following Sara's funeral, the narrator explains that:

Todo el mundo siente la obligación de pasar por aquí, contarme su versión de los hechos, asegurarme que ha sentido esta muerte hasta el corazón. En el fondo deben pensar que alguna vez escribiré sobre Sara, y no quieren salir mal parados en el papel. También deben pensar que yo me he comportado siempre como un simple testigo, sin implicarme ni aconsejar como los demás hicieron, por lo que seré una cronista imparcial (63).

[Everyone in the world feels an obligation to pass through here, to tell me their version of the facts, to assure me that they have felt this death in their hearts. Deep down, they must think that one day I will write about Sara, and they don't want to look bad on paper. Also, they must think that I've always acted merely as a witness, without implicating myself or giving advice like everyone else did, so I'll be an impartial reporter]\*.

This revelation puts into question the reliability of all who serve as narrators throughout the narrative trajectory, including the main narrator, who has already made it clear that she is also conscious of the fact that she is writing about Sara's life. Is it possible that she, too, is trying to assure the narratee that Sara's death has affected her, and that she, too, does not want to look bad on paper? In order to find the answers to this question, one must examine to whom the narrator's writing is directed as well as the content of that writing.

As stated above, the narrator is a writer by trade. It is through the act of writing and creation of narrative that the narrator is able to create the presence of the already deceased Sara. She also establishes writing as her main form of communication with her narratees. In "Signature Event Context," Jacques Derrida explains that all writing necessarily implies absence:

A written sign is proffered in the absence of the addressee. How is this absence to be qualified? One might say that at the moment when I write, the addressee may be absent from my field of present perception...What holds for the addressee holds also, for the same reasons, for the sender or producer. To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive, that my future disappearance in principle will not prevent from functioning and from yielding, and yielding to itself to, reading and rewriting...For the written to be written, it must continue to 'act' and to be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written... (315-16)

Furthermore, he explains that, "The sign is born at the same time as imagination and memory, at the moment when it is demanded by the absence of the object for present perception" (314). In other words, the narrator only decides to write about Sara once her presence disappears, hence the object of her writing is also absent.<sup>4</sup>

While serving as a narratee, all of the stories the narrator receives come directly from other narrators. She does not, however, directly respond to the narrators. Rather, she composes letters addressed to the people whom she believes played an active role in Sara's demise. Aside from the fact that the addressees of her letters are not present when she writes to them, nor would she be present when they read them, the narrator also assumes that their absence will continue after they receive them. She states that, "Ya había decidido no decir nada sobre el tema de Sara a ninguno de sus indirectos protagonistas. Les escribiría una carta. Esta carta serviría para romper, puesto que en cuanto la leyeran no querrían volver a verme jamás" (48) [I had already decided to say nothing on the theme of Sara to any of her indirect protagonists. I would write a letter. This letter would serve as a break up because, as soon as they read it, they would never want to see me again]\*. Furthermore, although all four letters appear in the narrative, they do not function as the narrator originally intended. There is no evidence that she actually sends the letters to the four recipients, and thus they come to represent a double absence – the absence necessarily implied in the act of writing and the fact that the letters never reach their destinations.

Turning now to the content of the narrator's writing in the letters and in her primary narration, one discovers both a stark critique of a society in which traditional gender roles are upheld and encouraged, as well as a critique of traditional psychoanalytic treatment. The first part of the narrative provides a description of Sara's life while she, the narrator, and their mutual friends were students in the university during the tumultuous times of the 1968 student protests. There is no evidence, however, that any of

them actually participated in the protests. The narrator explains, with a considerable amount of admiration, the way in which Sara lived without any regard to the rules or expectations of society.<sup>5</sup> She developed various relationships with different men, only to laugh when they began to speak to her about love. She unabashedly spoke about her admiration for the male body, the enjoyment she took in simply watching certain men undress. And while Sara was promiscuous, free-spirited, and motivated strictly by her own desires, the narrator and their other friends were unable to reject traditional values completely. She explains that:

Yo me acostaba entonces con Pedro, y nuestra única contribución a la gran revolución sexual de los setenta era no sentirnos culpables por follar alegremente. La mayor parte de nuestros amigos hacía lo mismo, no había mucha promiscuidad, y el sexo estaba atemperado por los sentimientos amorosos y lastrado por la teoría. Largas sesiones de discusión teórica y polvos hambrientos, ése era el resultado final, más o menos satisfactorio. Por eso me fascinaba la facilidad de Sara para coleccionar pollas sin necesidad de coartadas intelectuales (20).

[I was sleeping with Pedro then, and our only contribution to the great sexual revolution of the seventies was not feeling guilty for happily fucking. The majority of our friends did the same, there wasn't a lot of promiscuity, and the sex was tempered with loving feelings and burdened by theory. Long sessions of theoretical discussions and hungry sex, this was the final result, more or less satisfactory. That's why I was fascinated by Sara's ability to collect cocks without the need for intellectual excuses]\*.

To the narrator, Sara's lifestyle represents the ultimate freedom – something that she and their other friends could never achieve.<sup>6</sup> While Sara managed to unconsciously behave according to the liberatory philosophies of the times, the other characters spent their time at the university reflecting on theory and philosophy without ever acting on any of it. As they got older, the narrator explains that, “...luego se nos ha enseñado que fueron tiempos baldíos donde nada de lo que soñábamos iba a convertirse en realidad” (39) [...then they

taught us that those were pointless times where nothing of which we were dreaming was going to become reality]\*.

When they leave the university, the fact that Sara enjoys the act of sex to such an extent and partakes in numerous sexual encounters does not represent originality or freedom: “El diagnóstico psiquiátrico de Ramona años más tarde fue afirmar que a Sara le fallaba el elemento humano” (18) [Ramona’s psychiatric diagnosis years later was to affirm that Sara was missing the human element]\*. The question then becomes: is Sara missing some human element? Is she purposely rebelling against society’s rules in order to prove a point? In *Anti-Oedipus*, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari state that, “Desire does not ‘want’ revolution, it is revolutionary in its own right, as though involuntarily, by wanting what it wants” (116), and this is exactly how the narrator explains Sara’s behavior:<sup>7</sup> “...rebelde es alguien que se opone, y Sara no se oponía. Simplemente llevaba a su camino, se alejaba del rebaño, hacía caso omiso a la ley social. Pero no se oponía” (23) [...a rebel is someone who opposes something, and Sara didn’t oppose anything. She simply followed her own path; she moved away from the flock, she ignored the social law. But she didn’t oppose it]\*. Although Sara may not have rebelled against society prior to getting married and having children, she certainly does so after. The function of desire is a drive, a becoming, a line of flight, but not a position. Her “movement” and “following” communicate this notion of desire as perpetual motion. For example, when she decides one day to lock herself in the bathroom and shut out the world. The question then becomes, what caused her to finally recognize the social laws



under which everyone else lived and feel the need to conform to them? The narrator believes this resulted from the others' need to intervene directly in Sara's life.

In the beginning of the narrative, the narrator expresses a clear admiration for Sara and her ability to exist outside of what is considered the norm:

...ella no necesitaba modelo, ni ideas ni justificaciones. Actuaba. Era el ser más caótico de la creación, el más libre, el más fuera de norma, de lógica y de moral. No se cuestionaba los motivos ni las razones, ni se preocupaba de lo que los demás pudieran pensar, ni de lo que pudiera pensar ella sobre sí misma, que suele ser lo realmente difícil de encajar cuando se pasan cuentas (11)

[...she didn't need a model, or ideas, or justifications. She acted. She was the most chaotic being ever created, the most free, the most outside the norm, logic, and morals. She didn't question motives or reasons, nor did she worry about what others thought; she didn't even worry about what she thought of herself, which is usually the most difficult to accept when people talk]\*.

All of the people on whom the narrator places blame, however, attempt to force Sara to conform to the norm, to give up her individuality, and ultimately give up her freedom.

From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, one can examine Sara's struggle as one between what Jacques Lacan labels the imaginary and the symbolic.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, it is in the imaginary stage that pleasure and desire dominate the subject, much like what Freud describes as the id. The symbolic stage, similar Freud's concept of the superego, represents an acceptance of the rules and order imposed on the subject by society. Traditionally, psychoanalysts believe that a failure to transition successfully from the imaginary stage to the symbolic will result in death. In *Secreta Penélope*, however, one finds just the opposite. Sara has spent her life in the imaginary without any concern for society's rules, and she shows no desire to transition into the symbolic. Her friends, and

the psychoanalysts who treat her, force her to do so, and her death seems to come as a result of her inability to cope with the symbolic.

While the majority of psychoanalysts consider pleasure to be something negative, even dangerous, Deleuze and Guattari offer a much more positive conception of desire in *Anti-Oedipus*.<sup>910</sup> They claim that, “From the moment that we place desire on the side of acquisition, we make desire an idealistic (dialectical, nihilistic) conception, which causes us to look upon it as primarily a lack; a lack of an object, a lack of the real object” (25), and later, “Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the *subject* that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject” (26).<sup>11</sup> Before she is forced to repress her desire, Sara thrives in the imaginary; when she lives according to her own desires, she is not lacking anything. On the contrary, it is not until she is introduced to the symbolic, the rules of society, and is forced to repress her desire that she feels there is something she lacks.

Deleuze and Guattari explain that, “If desire is repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society: not that desire is asocial, on the contrary. But it is explosive; there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors” (*Anti-Oedipus* 116). Even within the modern age in which the narrative of *Secreta Penélope* takes place, a time in which many women assert their equality to men, society still expects women to conform to traditional gender roles; it expects them to marry men and become mothers. Sara’s desire and her ability to exist within the imaginary pose a distinct threat to all of these societal expectations.

The first person on which the narrator places blame for Sara's eventual destruction is Berta. According to the narrator, "Berta no se inscribía en ninguna tendencia clara, pero rozaba el *establishment*. Era guapa y segura de sí misma, decidida, positiva, de juicios rápidos y claros. Tenía una respuesta para cada pregunta y para cada problema una solución" (28) [Berta didn't enlist in any movement in particular, but she pushed the limits of the establishment. She was pretty and self-confident, determined, positive, with quick and clear opinions. She had an answer to every question and a solution for every problem]\*. The narrator describes her as the perfect mother, not only to her own children, but also to her stepchildren and her adopted children. Her involvement in Sara's demise comes after Sara's promiscuity results in an unwanted pregnancy and abortion. In an attempt to comfort her, Berta reassures Sara that she will one day have an opportunity to become a mother when the time is right. According to the narrator, this moment in which Berta puts the idea of motherhood in Sara's mind constitutes the beginning of her downfall.

Following the abortion, Berta and Ramona take it upon themselves to attempt to 'normalize' Sara's life and they encourage her to get married. The narrator, on the other hand, is shocked by Sara's decision to follow such a traditional path: "A ella seguramente le parecía que todo el mundo se casaba porque era una costumbre, una vieja tradición que no se cuestionaba. Le daba igual. Si no le huberian sugerido que debía casarse, nunca se le hubiera ocurrido por ella misma. Pero se lo sugirieron como solución, porque su vida cada vez se acercaba más al caos" (65-66) [Surely to her, it seemed everyone got married because it was a custom, an old tradition that one didn't question. It made no difference

to her. If no one had suggested that she should get married, it never would have occurred to her. But they suggested it as a solution, because her life kept getting closer and closer to chaos]\*.

Sara agrees, and at first, she seems to accept her new role as wife. She goes to the grocery store; she and Adrián, her husband, host small dinner parties for their friends and their significant others; and Sara does not complain. It is at one such dinner party, however, that the narrator observes the interactions between Sara and her husband, and begins to fear for her friend. Not only does Sara not complain in her new role as wife, but also she barely speaks at all. The narrator observes that, “Aquella noche estaba callada por completo. Con toda probabilidad era lo que hacía siempre estando junto a su marido, callaba y otorgaba” (80-81) [That night she was completely silent. In all probability, it was what she always did next to her husband, shut up and consent]\*. This serves as an indication of Sara’s inability to successfully transition from the imaginary stage into the symbolic. She is unable to use the language that dominates the symbolic stage in order to express herself and thus remains silent. In *Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence*, Michelle B. Walker discusses the philosophical tendency of denying women a voice through repression. She states that, “The processes of denial enact a silencing by attempting to cover over or repress troubling voices. Not surprisingly we find that what is repressed is often associated with woman – her voice, her body, her sexuality” (27). In other words, by forcing Sara to accept the symbolic, her friends (and society) are forcing her to repress her own sexuality and desires not only for her own supposed benefit, but also for the benefit of society by silencing her ‘troubling voices.’

Equally troubling to the narrator at this same dinner party is the way in which Sara's husband, Adrián, speaks to her. She describes it as, “...hierático, inexpresivo, paciente, condescendiente y a la vez sonoro, grave. En concreto cuando pronunció su nombre: Sara, le imprimió todo el carácter bíblico que alguna vez había tenido. Sara, con la misma reminiscencia de ‘mujer’ en genérico...” (81-82) [...hieratic, inexpressive, patient, condescending and at once resonant and grave. Especially when he pronounced her name: Sara, imprinting it with all the biblical connotations it once had. Sara, with the same reminiscence as ‘woman’ in general]\*. In the Old Testament, Abraham's wife Sarah is described as very beautiful, although she is unable to have children. Yet, by the grace of God, Sarah conceives at the age of ninety and gives birth to a son, Isaac. She lives to be 127 years old.<sup>12</sup> In the New Testament, Sarah is once again referenced by Saint Peter, who urges wives to be submissive to their husbands, saying, “For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master” (*The Holy Bible, New International Version*, 1 Peter 2:22). In *Secreta Penélope*, Sara has very little in common with her biblical namesake. Although she tries to be an obedient wife to Adrián, she finds it impossible to remain faithful and she is anything but a ‘symbol,’ like the Biblical Sara, a generic woman.

Within her marriage, however, Adrián attempts to uphold and reinforce the traditional gender roles that Sara has spent her life ignoring. In her letter addressed to him, the narrator reproaches Adrián for this, saying, “(Sara)...no sabía vivir con normalidad, de un modo organizado y sólido. Además, no sabía reivindicar su

originalidad. No, lo intentaba, intentaba ser normal y cotidiana a su modo torpe y aburrido” (123) [Sara...didn’t know how to live with normalcy, in an organized, solid way. Moreover, she didn’t know how to reclaim her originality. She didn’t try to, she tried to be normal and quotidian in her own stupid and boring way]\*, and she implores him, “¿Por qué no la abandonaste en el momento en que te diste cuenta de que no servía para los asuntos cotidianos?” (124) [Why didn’t you leave her the moment you realized she wouldn’t serve your quotidian affairs?]\*.

One theory that could be used to explain Sara’s situation is Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of schizoanalysis, which is essentially the study of differences. They assert that all human beings living within modern societies are segmented into various territories, or fixed structures, that are imposed and reinforced by the power structures of society. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this type of segmentation as aborescent in order to emphasize the linear, hierarchical nature of society. In opposition to this aborescent thought is their concept of the rhizome. They explain that, “It is our view that genetic axis and profound structure are above all infinitely reproducible principles of *tracing*. All of tree logic is a logic of tracing and reproduction...The tree articulates and hierarchizes tracings; tracings are like the leaves of a tree” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 12). On the other hand, “...a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model. It is a stranger to any idea of genetic axis or deep structure” (12). Before Sara entered into the institution of marriage, she had a sort of rhizomatic existence dominated by the imaginary. The narrator describes her thought process as one without any established order and her life as chaotic, always taking place on the margin of society. Sara, much like the rhizome, was

not subjected to any structural model; she managed to exist outside of the segmentarities of society. Following her abortion, however, Berta and Ramona begin their campaign of normalcy and introduce Sara to the idea of the segmentarity of marriage. When Adrián does not leave Sara even after he realizes that she is not suited to his conception of married life, he becomes a molar line that supports the segmentarity of marriage. When he gives her a child, he reinforces the segmentarity of the symbolic.

At the time of Camila's birth, everyone seems hopeful that this is what Sara needs to finally accept her new way of life. The narrator states, "¿Alguno de los presentes pensaba que el nacimiento de aquella niña podía poner fin a los problemas de Sara en su relación con el mundo? Supongo que sí, y supongo que lo pensaban con sinceridad" (132) [Did anyone present think that the birth of that child would put an end to Sara's problems in relation to the world? I suppose yes, and I suppose they thought it with sincerity]\*. Even the narrator finds herself hoping to see Sara flourish in motherhood. However, for a woman who has struggled with the loss of her freedom and has been unable to adapt to the traditional roles imposed on her from society, the presence of a child who is completely dependent upon her becomes just one more link in the chain that is holding her captive.

Sara begins to feel trapped in her own home; Ramona tells the narrator that, "Sara consideraba su casa, su espacio, su centro vital como una especie de trampa para elefantes. Era como si un animal salvaje hubiera podido hablar sobre su jaula en el zoológico" (136) [Sara considered her house, her space, her vital center like a kind of trap for elephants. It was as if a wild animal could talk about their cage in a zoo]\*. Regardless

of her feelings of confinement, however, Sara tries to care for her daughter; the narrator observes that, “Aquella vez, y justo con el tema más de fondo, más trascendente, la sagrada maternidad, demostraría al mundo y se demostraría a sí mismo que era tan buena como cualquiera, que era normal” (144) [That time, and precisely with the most basic, important thing, sacred maternity, she would show the world and she would show herself that she was just as good as anyone else, that she was normal]\*. For a time, it seems that she does manage to uphold her duties. She cites all the classic theories on raising children, she claims she learned all the lessons she needed to regarding how to properly raise a child. The narrator, however, remains skeptical as to how Sara is adjusting to her new roles:

Quizá Berta llevaba razón. Ahora tenía un marido, una hija, un trabajo...las cosas por las que la gente suele luchar. Sin embargo, ¿quién podía asegurar que lo que pasaba por su mente la dejaba tranquila y feliz? ¿Y si estaba sufriendo enormemente con aquellos logros sociales que no había deseado ni poco ni mucho? ¿No es eso al final lo que cuenta, cómo percibimos subjetivamente en el fondo de nuestra mente la realidad? (151) [Maybe Berta was right. Now, she had a husband, a daughter, a job...the things for which people usually fight. However, who could be certain that what went through her mind left her calm and happy? And if she was suffering greatly with those social achievements that she had never really wanted? Isn't what counts, in the end, how we subjectively perceive reality deep within our mind?]\*

While the narrator may be correct in her skepticism, the problem is that Sara feels obligated to accept the role society has forced on her. She has been convinced that she must conform to the symbolic in order to survive, that she must accept the segmentarity of motherhood, regardless of how she subjectively sees her own reality. And her new reality as a mother is terrifying.



The first time the narrator visits Sara after Camila is born, she witnesses the horrifying ordeal of Sara bathing her daughter. The child cries endlessly, fighting against all the efforts of her mother, and Sara appears to be unfazed. The narrator confesses that, “La verdad es que, durante aquel baño traumático, temí que en algún momento Sara sufriera un delirio de locura y ahogara a su hija” (145) [The truth is, during that traumatic bath, I was afraid that at any moment Sara would suffer a delirium of insanity and drown her daughter]\*. As Camila gets older, all of Sara’s friends begin to notice the hatred Camila clearly feels toward her mother. Much later, Sara shares with the narrator what she believes to be the reason for Camila’s hatred. After confessing that she has never truly loved anyone in her life, including her daughter, she explains:

Sólo sé que no puedo hacerla sufrir, pero nunca la he querido...¿Por qué crees que ella me odia? Siempre se ha dado cuenta de eso, desde que era como animalito incapaz de pensar...Yo no la maltrataba, ni la rechazaba; al contrario, había aprendido las lecciones que había que aprender y le hablaba de modo cariñoso, me desvivía por ella. Pero daba lo mismo, lo notaba, notaba que no la quería...(241)

[I only know that I can’t make her suffer, but I’ve never loved her...Why do you think she hates me? She’s always known that, ever since she was like a little animal unable to think...I didn’t mistreat her, I didn’t reject her; on the contrary, I had learned all the lessons I needed to learn and I spoke to her in a caring way, I did everything for her. But it didn’t matter, she felt it, she felt that I didn’t love her...]\*

Although Sara does everything society expects her to do as a mother, she cannot change who she is. She tries desperately to conform to her maternal role, but it is impossible for her to develop the necessary relationship with her daughter to fully integrate herself into maternity.

When Adrián falls in love with another woman and leaves Sara alone with her daughter, however, the ‘symbolic paternal order’ that she tries so desperately to accept

disappears and she falls into a deep depression. As Julia Kristeva explains in “About Chinese Women”:

For a woman, the call of the mother is not only a call from beyond time, or beyond the socio-political battle. With family and history at an impasse, this call troubles the word...After the superego, the ego founders and sinks. It is a fragile envelope, incapable of staving off the irruption of this conflict, of this love which had bound the little girl to her mother, and which then, like black lava, had lain in wait for her all along the path of her desperate attempts to identify with the symbolic paternal order. Once the moorings of the word, the ego, the superego, begin to slip, life itself can't hang on: death quietly moves in. Suicide without a cause, or sacrifice without fuss for an apparent cause which, in our age, is usually political: a woman can carry off such things...as though it were simply a matter of making an inevitable, irresistible and self-evident transition. (156-157).

It is as if Sara, who had lived comfortably in the imaginary until forced to accept the symbolic, lost her only link to the symbolic paternal order. All of her friends know that Sara cannot fulfill the role of mother by herself, so they once again try to find a solution to the problem that is Sara's life. Berta insists that she must find another husband, a man who can fill the father void in her small family unit. In the eyes of the narrator, Sara becomes a sort of ‘secret Penelope,’ entertaining an array of possible suitors who never manage to fulfill the vacant role. Ramona, being a psychoanalyst, decides Sara must begin psychoanalytic treatment, and it is this decision that seems to eventually lead Sara to suicide.

On her website, Alicia Giménez Bartlett states that, “Creo que (el psicoanálisis) ha hecho mucho daño a la mujer porque es una especie de religión que ha tomado el sexo femenino como objeto de estudio tratándolo como un problema especial”<sup>13</sup> [I believe that psychoanalysis has done much harm to women because it's a type of religion that has taken the feminine sex as an object of study, treating it like a special problem]\*. After

learning more and more about psychoanalysis through Ramona, the narrator in *Secreta Penélope* comes to share Giménez Bartlett's negative view of psychoanalytic therapy. She begins to believe that psychoanalysis does nothing more than encourage people, women especially, to conform to what is expected of them. In her discussion regarding the development of the ego, Elizabeth Grosz explains in her book *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, that "(The ego's) role is unifying, homogenizing, and organizing the chaotic, pleasure-seeking impulses of the id. In relation to reality, its aim is to rationalize and justify many of the id's demands, to represent it to social Law. It is a moderating influence on the strength and specificity of id impulses, bringing them into line with what is socially acceptable" (25). The problem for Sara is that she managed to exist comfortably in her rhizomatic existence, dominated by the imaginary where she was driven by the chaotic, pleasure-seeking impulses of the id. She did not appear to have a problem until her friends, society, and the psychoanalysts declared that there was a problem.

In their last meeting before Sara's suicide, she and the narrator discuss the progress of her psychoanalytic treatment. Sara appears to be happy with the results of her treatment, stating that it has helped her understand that she has made numerous mistakes in her life and that she must accept the rules of society and live accordingly in order to avoid hurting others. The narrator immediately recognizes the influence of psychoanalysis in Sara's explanation: "Utilizaba ya el lenguaje del clan, pero no se beneficiaba de las ventajas internas del mismo. No, ella era clase de tropa, no miembro del club. Constituía la mismísima imagen de la doliente enferma frente a Freud" (249)

[She was already using the language of the clan, but she wasn't benefiting from the internal advantages. No, she was part of the hordes, not a member of the club. She constituted the very image of the suffering, sick woman in front of Freud]\*. At one point, the narrator even expresses her views to Sara and tries to warn her of the dangers of her treatment: "Dices que tu terapeuta está ayudándote a que las cosas tengan orden y funcionen bien. Estoy convencida de que es verdad, debe serlo, pero funcionarán según los patrones que ellos tienen en la cabeza, no según los que tengas tú. Te asfixiarán, te dirán que eres madre y te debes a la maternidad, pero si no tienes hijos, encontrarán otro punto débil para hacerte capitular" (251) [You say that your therapy is helping you get things in order so everything functions well. I'm sure that's true, it should be, but they'll function according to the masters that they have in their heads, not the ones you have in yours. They'll strangle you, they'll tell you that you're a mother and your duty is being a mother, but if you don't have children, they'll find some other weak point to make you surrender]\*. Sara, however, has already accepted society's expectations of her. For Sara, psychoanalysis seems to have the same effect that Deleuze and Guattari explain it has on Freud's classic case of Little Hans: "Look at what happened to Little Hans already, an example of child psychoanalysis at its purest: they kept on BREAKING HIS RHIZOME and BLOTCHING HIS MAP, setting it straight for him, blocking his every way out, until he began to desire his own shame and guilt, until they had rooted shame and guilt in him..." (*A Thousand Plateaus* 14). She has come to see herself as a victim, her life as a failure, and when she cannot see any other way out, the only solution is suicide.

Throughout the diegetic trajectory, the narrator accuses several characters of contributing to Sara's demise. She blames Berta for convincing Sara that she must marry and become a mother; she blames Adrián for forcing Sara to take on the roles of wife and mother and to give up her former identity; she blames Camila for punishing Sara with her hatred; and she blames Ramona for introducing Sara to the psychoanalytic therapy that led her to believe there was something inherently wrong with her. As she states in her letter to Camila, "Procrear, convivir, la familia, el amor...puro veneno para ella" (193) [Procreation, coexisting, family, love...pure poison for her]\*. Much like Plato's concept of the pharmakon<sup>14</sup>, what is thought to be a cure for Sara's chaotic lifestyle – marriage, family, stability – is actually the poison that eventually kills her.

However, it is important to remember that the narrator chooses not to express her feelings to all those on whom she places blame. Moreover, there are various points throughout the narrative when other characters imply that the narrator may also hold some of the blame for Sara's demise. It is an accusation that even the narrator herself cannot deny. At one point, she admits that Ramona:

Pensaba que lo único que me importaba de Sara era la imagen que proyectaba sobre los demás. Yo no podía resignarme a que no existieran de verdad mujeres libres, sin coartadas ideológicas ni sentimentales...Durante mucho tiempo había estado convencida de que Sara era uno de esos ejemplares, y al pensar que se tambaleaba ese valor que le había concedido, prefería seguir con mi idea y desconocer la verdad (156-7)

[Thought that the only thing that mattered to me about Sara was the image she projected over everyone else. I couldn't resign myself to the fact that truly free women didn't exist, without ideological or sentimental excuses...For a long time, I had been convinced that Sara was one of those models, and when that value began to sway, I preferred to keep my idea and not know the truth]\*.

The narrator does not deny Ramona's accusation, but rather asks, "¿Qué marca la diferencia entre lo que somos y aquello que representamos?" (157) [What marks the difference between who we are and what we represent?]\*. At the end of the narrative trajectory, even the narrator turns the lens on herself, stating, "Como es lógico nunca les confesaré a mis amigos los pensamientos de odio que he tenido hacia ellos. ¿Para qué? Hubiera provocado una serie de reacciones airadas, innecesarias. Seguramente me hubieran hecho una evidente pregunta retórica: ¿quién eres tú para adjudicarte el papel de juez? No es fácil contestar a eso porque, en efecto, ¿quién soy yo?" (283-284). [Logically, I never confessed to my friends the thoughts of hatred I had for them. For what? It would have provoked a series of unnecessary, angry reactions. Surely they would have asked me the rhetorical question: who are you to take the role of judge? It's not easy to answer this because, in effect, who am I?]\*.

The final thoughts of the narrator appear to reflect a general existential doubt that causes one to question the validity of her entire narration. However, returning to a narratological examination, this forces one to reexamine the entire function of the narrative. On the one hand, the narrative appears to represent a type of interior monologue. Seymour Chatman proposes certain criteria for interior monologue, including first person self-reference, a synchronicity between the discourse time and story time, identifiable language, and he states that, "There is no presumptive audience other than the thinker himself, no deference to the ignorance or expository needs of a narratee" (*Story and Discourse* 183). The homodiegetic narrator in *Secreta Penélope* chooses not to send her letters to their intended narratees in order to avoid the possibility of judgment turning

towards herself, yet she still partakes in a long work of abduction in order to find some sort of hermeneutic explanation for Sara's suicide. If the narrator functions here as both narrator and narratee, then she also serves as both writer and reader.

The self-reflexive nature of the narrator who is a writer by profession and has proclaimed from the beginning that she is writing about Sara can lead one to classify the narrative as what Linda Hutcheon terms a narcissistic narrative.<sup>15</sup> Also referred to as metafiction, the narcissistic narrative is one in which the process of creating the narrative is part of the narrative whole. In *Secreta Penélope*, the narrator presents herself many times as faithfully relating the story of what led to Sara's suicide. Yet there are also times when she admits to consciously choosing to believe certain things and deciding not to investigate them further. For example, after meeting with Camila and hearing about Sara's final love affair with an unknown priest, the narrator states, "No, no tenía intención de averiguar la identidad del enigmático sacerdote. Y no por lo problemática que hubiera podido presentarse la búsqueda, sino porque el dato de su nombre era en sí irrelevante. ¿Para qué completar el último capítulo si el final con el que contaba ya me parecía feliz?" (277) [I had no intention of finding out the identity of the enigmatic priest. And not because of the problems that could've come up in the search for him, but rather because his name was really irrelevant. Why complete the final chapter if the ending I was already told seemed happy to me?]\*. She also worries that if she had found him, he may not be the man she imagines: "¿Y si el tipo resultaba ser un farsante, un cursi, un cura que se aprovechaba de mujeres indefensas, un pederasta arrepentido que necesitaba el consuelo de un alma angelical? No, mejor no conocerlo, era preferible pensar que Sara

había hallado el amor en un hombre lleno de virtudes...” (278) [And if he turned out to be a fraud, a snob, a priest who takes advantage of defenseless women, a repentant pedophile who needed the comfort of an angelic soul? No, it was better not to know, I preferred to think that Sara had found the love of man full of virtues...]\*. Her decision to accept the happy ending at which she finally arrives without taking the risk of proving it false is an overt part of her creation of the narrative, yet it does not necessarily negate her work of abduction. As Hutcheon explains in *Narcissistic Narrative*, “The act of creation becomes paradigmatic of all human acts of constructing ordered visions. The writer and the reader share this process in and through the novelistic text...(The novel) is...a continuation of that ordering, fiction-making process that is part of our normal coming to terms with experience” (89). In *Secreta Penélope*, the main writer uses the diegetic trajectory to come to terms with her own experience, to find meaning in her experience, and by putting it in writing, she allows the narratee to experience the hermeneutic outcome with her.

The question still remains, however, as to what the narrative means for Sara – the main character of the story, the one whose death marks the entire novel. The narrator writes about Sara, she writes of Sara, and she, in a sense, writes for Sara. Yet, Sara is dead; she is absent from the present moment of the story; she can no longer speak for herself. Following the death of his friend, Roland Barthes, Derrida explains:

Even if I wanted or was able to give an account, to speak of him as he was for me...even if I tried to reproduce what took place, what place would be reserved for the reserve? What place for the long periods of silence, for what was left unsaid out of discretion, for what was of no use bringing up, either because it was too well known by both of us or else infinitely unknown on either side? To go on speaking of this all alone, after the



death of the other, to sketch out the least conjecture or risk the least interpretation, feels to me like an endless insult or wound – and yet also a duty, a duty toward him. Yet I will not be able to carry it out, at least not right here. Always the promise of return (*The Work of Mourning* 55).

In other words, although the narrator has managed to create some sense of Sara's presence following her absence in death, it is impossible for her to truly reproduce Sara's presence for her narratee. A life reduced to a collage of narratives can never replace or reproduce the life that was. It retains its value only for those still living, as it can mean nothing for the one who is dead.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, an \* will indicate that the translation is my own.

<sup>2</sup> Currently, the only published work devoted to *Secreta Penélope* is Francisco Javier Higuero's "Indagación metadiegetica en *Secreta Penélope* de Giménez Bartlett" (2014).

<sup>3</sup> To further elaborate on the relationship between fiction and criticism, see *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions* by Cathy Caruth and *The Fiction of Narrative* by Hayden White.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, has explained the binary dichotomy of absence and presence in writing.

<sup>5</sup> In *La virtud en la mirada*, Aurelio Arteta offers a phenomenological approach to the study of feelings and admiration.

<sup>6</sup> Sara's lifestyle is perceived by the homodiegetic narrator with admiration.

<sup>7</sup> To clarify Deleuze's point, if desire does not accomplish what it wants then it is not revolutionary.

<sup>8</sup> Juan David Nasio examines the difference between the imaginary and the symbolic in *Cinco lecciones sobre la teoría de Jacques Lacan*.

<sup>9</sup> The dangers of pleasure are expressed in many works by Freud.

<sup>10</sup> In Adelaida García Morales' novel, *La señorita Medina*, all of the characters who experience pleasure die, much like Sara.

<sup>11</sup> See Stivale's *The Two-Fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari* for further explanation on the role played by desire in schizoanalysis.

<sup>12</sup> The biblical personality of Sarah is the subject of José Jiménez Lozano's novel, *Sara de Ur*.

<sup>13</sup> [www.aliciagimenezbartlett.es](http://www.aliciagimenezbartlett.es)

<sup>14</sup> See Jacques Derrida's essay, "Plato's Pharmacy"

<sup>15</sup> While Hutcheon considers metafiction to be narcissistic, the narrator of *Secreta Penélope* does not display any narcissistic qualities.

### CHAPTER 3: SEARCH FOR SELFHOOD IN *MI VIDA SEGÚN MARTÍN*

Sara Barrena received a doctoral degree in Philosophy from the University of Navarra in 2003. She is perhaps most well known as a scholar who specializes in the work of American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, a pioneer in pragmatism and semiotics. Although she published a book of short stories called *Desde el corazón* [*From the Heart*]\* in 2001, in 2010 she published her first full-length fictional novel, which stands on its own as a literary narrative full of interpretative potential. *Mi vida según Martín* [*My Life According to Martín*]\* tells the story of Violeta, the narrator, who is inspired to reexamine her life and confront her past. As she recounts her struggles growing up without a mother, her unrequited loves, an unhappy marriage, and the ordeal she faces in raising a deaf son, Violeta also describes her motivation for such reflections – the emails she exchanges with Martín, a mysterious, unknown pescador [fisherman].\*

In *Secreta Penélope*, the act of narrating serves primarily as a way of achieving a subjective understanding of one's experiences as well as a means of creating a collage of narratives to memorialize another's life. In *Mi vida según Martín*, however, the main character's goal is actually the act of narrating itself, the search for someone to whom she can tell her story and the language with which to do it.<sup>1</sup> Her search for narration leads to questions not only about language, but also absence and embodiment; her journey chronicles a modern woman's conflict about ethics, intellect, and fulfillment. Such a quest, though immensely personal for the narrator, more broadly reflects the exigency that exists for women to move beyond the traditional notions of identity construction in order to discover their own unique, alternatives. In general terms, while the narrator of

*Secreta Penélope* feels compelled to narrate Sara's life story, the narrator of *Mi vida según Martín* feels she must narrate her own life story.

As the main storyteller who is also the most relevant character of the story, Violeta serves as an autodiegetic narrator, and as such, her storytelling creates a number of uncertainties, questions, and tensions regarding notions of truth, identity, and the personal construction of both. According to Gerald Prince, in the case of an autodiegetic narrator, "We can then make a distinction between the first person as narrator and the first person as character" (*Narratology* 14). As a narrator, Violeta narrates the story of 'her life according to Martín' by alternating between descriptions of her past and the present-day correspondence she maintains with the narratee. To be exact, there are twenty-one chapters in the novel that are narrated in the present tense, from the present moment of the narrative. As Seymour Chatman explains, "Narratives establish a sense of a present moment, narrative NOW, so to speak. If the narrative is overt, there are perforce two NOWs, that of the discourse, the moment occupied by the narrator in the present tense...and that of the story, the moment the action began to transpire, usually in the preterite" (*Story and Discourse* 63). The story is divided into four parts: Violeta's childhood and adolescence in Pamplona, her time as a student in Paris, her experiences as a wife and new mother, and finally her life in Madrid dedicated to raising her son. The present moment of the narration, or the narrative NOW, spans a much shorter time, although not specified, and appears sporadically throughout the story that covers forty years of Violeta's life.

As a mediated narration, or “a narration featuring an overt rather than covert narrator” (*Dictionary* Prince 50), the diegetic discourse of *Mi vida según Martín* presupposes a narratee. The narrator must be narrating something to someone. In this case, it is clear that the narratee is Martín, the mysterious ‘pescador’ with whom Violeta claims to be communicating. However, upon further investigation, one finds evidence that Martín may be merely a product of Violeta’s imagination, an imaginary narratee to whom she can tell her story. Of the twenty-one descriptions Violeta narrates of their correspondences, of two hundred and ninety letters she claims to have received from him, only six descriptions contain what appear to be direct discourse, which Prince defines as “A type of discourse whereby a character’s utterances or thoughts are given or quoted in the way the character (presumably) formulated them...” (*Dictionary* 20). Furthermore, even Violeta admits that, “A veces me cuesta creer que Martín sea real” (96) [Sometimes it’s difficult for me to believe that Martín is real]\*. She has never met him, she has no idea what he looks like, and she has never spoken to him in person. The role of Martín as a narratee within the narrative begs the question of why Violeta needs to create such a character. The answer may lie in the words of the narrator herself:

A la luz de Martín examino mi vida desde sus principios violetas. Al contárselo, lo comprendo todo mejor. Los sentimientos y los acontecimientos encajan como nunca antes hecho. Todo se articula. Mis abuelos vuelven a la vida y me acarician. Comprendo por fin los silencios lacónicos de mi padre y al pasar los dedos sobre mi corazón noto en las yemas, por primera vez sin sentir rencor, los surcos de las profundas arrugas. Mis penas, traumas, alegrías y dolores, mis dudas y mis miedos, mis ansias, también reviven y adquieren un nuevo sentido. Llegan, por fin, a constituir una vida. (50)

[By the light of Martín I examine my life from the first violetas. By telling it to him, I understand everything better. The feelings and events fit together like never before. Everything becomes joined. My grandparents

return to life and embrace me. I finally understand my father's laconic silences, and when I run my fingers over my heart, I note for the first time without rancor the profound creases of the wrinkles. My shames, traumas, happiness and pain, my doubts and fears, my anxieties, also come alive and take on a new meaning. They arrive, at last, to constitute a life]\*.

In his article, "Life in Quest of Narrative," Paul Ricoeur puts forth the necessary elements of a narrative, explaining that, "...the mediation between man and the world is what we call *referentiality*; the mediation between men, *communicability*; the mediation between man and himself, *self-understanding*" (27). In other words, it is by communicating that which she has experienced in the past to another person that Violeta can finally achieve a sense of self-understanding.

Although Martín serves as this necessary narratee in the present moment of the narrative, the story reveals several other characters to which Violeta narrates before Martín comes into existence. As such, one must examine not only why these former narratees do not function the way in which Violeta needs them to in order to fully understand and accept her life, but also how they contribute to her construction of a coherent present. Throughout her entire childhood, Violeta searches not only for a narratee, but also for the words with which she can express herself to a narratee. She grows up without a mother, her father is a man of very few words, and Violeta describes herself as a very silent child. The first person to truly serve as a narratee for Violeta is her doctoral dissertation advisor, Baptiste Barat. She meets Baptiste in her first year of university in Paris and she begins writing to him regularly to practice her French. They develop a relationship beyond that of simply student and teacher; it becomes a relationship between narrator and narratee. She writes to him:

...sobre mi madre muerta, sobre mis abuelos, sobre las palabras, sobre Dios, sobre sor Lucile, sobre aquel primer novio pamplonés que me dejó por no tener palabras, y sobre tantas otras cosas que se me ocurrían sólo cuando pensaba en escribir para Baptiste Barat...Baptiste sacaba de mí cosas que no sabía que tenía dentro, pero que bajo su influencia se desprendían de mi alma como el espinazo de un pescado hervido (130-31). [...about my dead mother, about my grandparents, about words, about God, about Sor Lucile, about that first boyfriend in Pamplona who left me for not having words, and about many other things that only occurred to me when I thought about writing for Baptiste Barat...Baptiste brought things out of me that I didn't know I had inside, but that, under his influence, separated from my soul like the spine of a boiled fish]\*.

It is important to note that Violeta describes her correspondence with Baptiste much in the same way that she describes that with Martín. In the descriptions she provides of Martín, she says, “Hoy me ha escrito Martín. Como todas las mañanas, he venido nada más levantarme a buscar su mensaje” (20) [Today Martín wrote to me. Like every morning, I have started to wake up for nothing more than to look for his message]\*, and later, “Podría vivir toda la vida alimentándome solo de un mensaje cada día” (96) [I could live my entire life nourishing myself only with one message each day]\*. About Baptiste, she states, “De sus palabras sacaba fuerza y compañía. Solía leer lo que me había escrito a primera hora de la mañana y con frecuencia alguna de sus frases me acompañaba durante el día” (333) [From his words I gained strength and company. I usually read what he had written me first thing in the morning and frequently some of his phrases would accompany me throughout the entire day]\*. Although the grammatological relevance of the practice and exercise of writing will be discussed later, the fact that these two relationships that Violeta maintains both take place primarily through writing provides another noteworthy similarity. Throughout the narrative trajectory, Violeta narrates long descriptions of the effect that Martín's writing has on her, the way it makes

her feel, and how important it is for her to maintain their written correspondence. When she reflects on her relationship with Baptiste, she states, “Yo le escribía textos, primero porque él me lo sugirió para que practicara el francés, pero después porque se convirtió en una necesidad entre nosotros. Le escribía cosas que no me hubiera atrevido todavía a decirle de palabra...” (130) [I wrote him texts, first because he suggested it to me to practice my French, but later because it became a necessity between us. I wrote him things that I was never able to tell him in person]\*.

The significant difference between the narratees, however, is that Baptiste is an actual character with a physical presence in the novel, much like the others Violeta will eventually try to invoke as narratees. He is a middle-aged man who is tall and thin, with blue eyes, and long, black, graying hair. Although Violeta narrates to him primarily through writing, their relationship is also an embodied one in that it is dependent upon their weekly meetings in which Violeta physically delivers her writings to him. He is also married with two children, and their relationship as one of narrator and narratee undergoes the first of many changes following Violeta’s own marriage to Luis.

Unlike Violeta and Baptiste, Luis is not a scholar or an intellectual; he is an engineer. According to the narrator, “Luis nunca había leído a Balzac, ni tenía un diccionario en su mesilla, aunque lo sabía todo sobre las aleaciones de acero,” (154) [Luis had never read Balzac, nor did he have a dictionary on his desk, although he knew everything about the steel alloys]\*. Following their marriage, Violeta begins to resent Luis for his inability to understand her obsession with words, and since her relationship with Baptiste has changed, she finds herself searching for someone else to whom she can

narrate the story of her life. It is at this point that Violeta begins a passionate affair with a young doctor named Edouard. They spend countless afternoons secretly meeting in Edouard's apartment, talking and making love. She explains that, "Todas aquellas palabras las comprendí de otra manera en aquellas tardes con Edouard. Y también otras muchas que formaban parte de las historias que me contaba como un intervalo entre los besos, pues descubrí que Edouard hablaba mucho a veces y tenía mil historias insólitas" (256) [All of those words I understood differently on those afternoons with Edouard. And also other things that formed part of the stories that he told me as an interval between kisses. I discovered that Edouard talked a lot sometimes, and he had thousands of incredible stories]\*. Eventually, Violeta finds that she cannot talk to Edouard, that he does not understand her in the way Baptiste does, and she becomes a silent narratee to whom only Edouard narrates.

The final narratee Violeta attempts to invoke throughout the narrative trajectory is her son, Tomás. After trying unsuccessfully for years to get pregnant, Violeta is overjoyed when she discovers that she and Luis are finally going to have a baby. Immediately, she explains, "...me sentí feliz y pude, al fin, hablar con mi hijo, que aún no sabía si sería niño o niña. Hablé con él y pude decirle que le quería, que lo deseaba, que tenía muchas ganas de conocerle. No me pregunté entonces si, desde el vientre, me estaría escuchando" (303) [I was happy and I could, at last, talk with my child, who I still didn't know would be a boy or a girl. I talked to him, and I was able tell him I loved him, that I wanted him, and that I was very excited to meet him. I didn't ask myself then if, inside the womb, he would be listening to me]\*. She not only speaks to him, but she also



tells him stories and plays music for him. Already she finds in her unborn child a narratee, one whom she expects will continue in this role after he is born.

Unfortunately, Violeta's expectations of Tomás serving as a narratee are short lived. Soon after he is born she realizes something is wrong: "El niño era sordo. No podía oírme, no podía escuchar las palabras tranquilizadoras que siempre le susurraba, no había escuchado ni una sola de las cosas que le había dicho durante el embarazo, ni una sola de las historias que le había leído..." (309) [The child was deaf. He couldn't hear me, he couldn't listen to the calm words I whispered to him, he hadn't heard any of the things I had told him while I was pregnant, none of the stories I read to him...]\*. Violeta and Luis know they must do something to help their child, so they decide to move to Madrid where their son will only need to learn to communicate in one language, rather than two. Violeta knows her decision is best for her child, but once in Madrid, she finds herself alone without a narratee – Baptiste is in Paris, she has left Edouard, and Tomás cannot hear her. It is at this point in the story that Martín comes into existence.

Violeta claims that Martín found her contact information on a website dedicated to parents with deaf children after his sister gave birth to a deaf son, and he decided to write to her. It is this correspondence that finally allows Violeta to narrate to a solid, stable narratee. However, in the years since she has moved to Madrid, Violeta has also been learning to communicate with her son, Tomás, using a new kind of language – sign language. She explains that, "...aprendimos a comunicarnos sin la voz...Además, había una particular belleza en el lenguaje de señas..." (326-27) [...we learned to communicate without our voices...What's more, there was a certain beauty in the language of signs]\*.

For Violeta, who has never felt adequate in the use of spoken language, sign language becomes a means of progressing even beyond written language. It forces her to encounter a type of embodied language and, in turn, embodied reality. As such, she is slowly finding in her son the narratee for whom she has longed and this eventually renders Martín unnecessary. At this point in the narrative trajectory, the story time and discourse time draw closer together, and when they converge, he is no longer needed to serve as a narratee for Violeta and Martín disappears completely.

Moving away from a purely narratological examination of the narrative trajectory, it is impossible to ignore the various absences that exist throughout both the story and the discourse. Such absences clearly call for an exploration of the deconstructive role they play during the narrative trajectory in order to uncover the ways in which the traditional binaries of presence/absence, mind/body, and language/reality are no longer sufficient in the construction of meaning.<sup>2</sup>

In *Mi vida según Martín*, the autodiegetic narrator, Violeta, tries to construct the meaning of her own being precisely in terms of both presence and absence. From the very beginning of the story, one finds what appear to be many significant absences in the life of the narrator. The first absence is that of her mother, who died while giving birth to Violeta. Throughout the narrative, the narrator repeatedly refers to herself as “la niña sin madre” [the child without a mother]\* and “medio huérfana,” [half orphan]\* both of which contribute to the development of her own subjectivity. However, Violeta explains early on that her mother “...se convirtió en una presencia invisible, en un alma cálida pero intangible que quizá me acunó una primera y última vez antes de subir al cielo...” (14)

[...had become an invisible presence, a warm yet intangible soul that perhaps rocked me for the first and last time before going to heaven...]\*. Although she is absent, Violeta's mother still remains present within her, and her invisible presence is one that Violeta feels constantly throughout her life.

The other most notable absence found throughout the narrative trajectory is what Violeta describes as the “falta de palabras” [lack of words]\* that plagues both her father and herself. Although her father is presented as a silent man, one who does not often speak, the absence of his words does not mean that communication is not present: “Desde que yo podía recordar, mi padre nunca decía varias frases seguidas. En sus ojos, muchas veces, aleteaban las palabras que no llegaba a pronunciar” (14) [Ever since I could remember, my father never said various phrases in succession. In his eyes, many times, the words fluttered that he was never able to pronounce]\*. Within herself, Violeta sees her own ‘falta de palabras,’ or lack of communication, as a constant barrier that she struggles to overcome. It is a trait that other people also notice about her: “Violeta, la pequeña. Es muy buena niña, agarra un libro y es como si no estuviera, muy callada” (31) [Violeta, the child. She's a very good girl, she grabs a book and it's as if she isn't there, very quiet]\*. Violeta, however, struggles to be identified as such. She states, “No me gustaba que hablaran de mí delante de mí, menos que dijeran que era callada. Ya de pequeña comprendía que la falta de palabras se retroalimenta: cuanto más te dicen lo callada que eres y esperan que hables, menos palabras encuentras” (31) [I didn't like that they talked about me in front of me, less so when they said I was quiet. Ever since I was young, I understood that the lack of words feeds back on itself: the more they tell you

how quiet you are and wait for you to talk, the less words you find]\*. When her father decides to remarry, she says nothing; when her stepmother gives birth to a stillborn child, Violeta cannot find the words to console her; when her first boyfriend breaks up with her because, “Me decía una vez y otra que la culpa era mía por no encontrar las palabras” (76) [He told me over and over that it was my fault for not finding any words to say]\*, she merely sits silently on the bench and watches him walk away.

The concepts of language, presence, and absence all call to mind Lacan’s notion of the symbolic order, which Lacan himself describes precisely as, “...presence in absence and absence in presence” (*Seminar II* 38).<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is also necessary to examine the main character’s experiences from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. One discovers that whereas Sara in *Secreta Penélope* is forced to transition from the imaginary into the symbolic order that eventually leads to her demise, Violeta in *Mi vida según Martín* endures a different type of struggle with the symbolic order.<sup>4</sup> According to Lacan, “...in the relation of the imaginary and the real, and in the constitution of the world such as results from it, everything depends on the position of the subject. And the position of the subject...is essentially characterised by its place in the symbolic world, in other words, in the world of speech” (*Seminar I* 80). The subject’s integration into and dependence upon the system of language begins at a very young age. Michael Lewis explains that, “The maternal object is what the child calls for when she is absent, and it proves to be an absence that a certain signifier succeeds in summoning to presence” (*Derrida and Lacan: Another Writing* 33). For Violeta, however, there is no signifier that can successfully summon the presence of her mother, who died giving birth to Violeta. She recalls that,

“Tampoco me dijo a qué edad aprendí a llamar ‘mamá’ a mi madre ausente” (14) [Nor did he ever tell me at what age I learned to call my absent mother ‘mom’]\*. From this very early age, Violeta feels inadequate in the world of speech, constantly searching for the words with which she can express herself.

As mentioned above, Violeta’s childhood is plagued by her “falta de palabras;” subsequently, in the second part of the novel, Violeta begins to dedicate her life to attempting to fully incorporate herself into the symbolic order. She feels compelled to study languages and literature, stating, “Sentí curiosidad por saber si las palabras bastan para descubrirlo todo...creció como una obsesión dentro de mí la idea de conocer cada una de las palabras, de averiguar dónde se escondían aquellas que le habían faltado a mi padre (89) [I felt a curiosity to know if words were enough to discover everything...I became obsessed with the idea of becoming familiar with every single word, of finding out where those that my father lacked were hiding]\*. She moves to Paris with the explicit goal of learning how to use language.

And yet, absent language continues to characterize her life. By writing to Baptiste, Violeta slowly learns to use language as some form of expression. However, she still feels unable to ‘speak,’ and this nearly destroys her marriage with Luis. Before their wedding, she feels she is unable to express her fears and doubts to him about their marriage. After the wedding, she feels that “La palabras se fueron todas y me abandonaron” (195) [All the words had left and abandoned me]\*. She almost tells Luis about her affair with Edouard when she plans on leaving him, but after witnessing an accident (which I will discuss in greater detail below), she decides to return home; she

does not tell him about her visits to the church when she prays to God to give her a child; and she waits weeks to tell him when she finally does get pregnant.

In *About Chinese Women*, Julia Kristeva describes the symbolic as “...the order of verbal communication...It provides the reference point, and, consequently, all possibilities of measurement, by distinguishing between a before, a now and an after. If *I* don’t exist except in the speech I address to another, *I* am only *present* in the moment of that communication” (*The Kristeva Reader* 152-53). It is as though Violeta feels that she must fully exist in the symbolic order in order to exist at all. And yet regardless of her supposed inability to find the words with which she can communicate verbally, the narrator does find various narratees to whom she can narrate, as mentioned before. Perhaps it is not that she is seeking to enter the symbolic order, precisely, but seeking another way through it. In her discussion of Luce Irigaray’s psychoanalytic work, Elizabeth Grosz explains that, “She refuses the ‘either/or’ logic of dichotomous models by presenting the feminine as a mode of occupying both alternatives, exerting a ‘both/and’ logic of difference in its place” (*Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* 177). Similarly, it is as though Violeta refuses to be defined by either the imaginary or the symbolic, and rather is searching for a way in which she can exist in both the imaginary and the symbolic.<sup>5</sup>

However, Violeta communicates with the two main narratees solely through writing, and for a time she relies on writing in order to communicate with Tomás. According to Derrida, all writing implies absence.<sup>6</sup> This absence is partly due to the fact that the receiver of the message is not present at the time in which the message is written.

This is true in all cases of Violeta's messages. She writes to and for Baptiste away from the university; Martín, who she admits she has never met, is supposedly travelling the world; and she writes messages to Tomás in private before leaving them in places around the house for him to find. The other implied absence in writing is that of the writer when the reader of the message has access to what has been written. This is also true in all of Violeta's written correspondence. While it is impossible for her to be present when Martín receives her messages, and it is suggested that she is not present when Tomás does, Violeta actually demands that she not be present when Baptiste reads her work. She states that, "...se los dejaba (los textos) a condición de que no los leyera hasta que me fuera" (130) [...I left him the texts on the condition that he not read them until I left]\*.

Although there are times when Violeta and Baptiste meet in person and discuss her writing, she only narrates to him through her writing, making it the sole means of communication between them. Martín, on the other hand, represents the ultimate presence through absence in the narrator's life. She never meets him in person and their entire relationship consists only in supposed communication through written email messages. Although his physical presence is always absent from her life, her present day narration is consumed by his presence through his writing. She explains that, "Ahora me doy cuenta de que he estado viviendo mi vida, día a día, para contársela a Martín, aunque yo no lo sabía ni él tampoco...A Martín quiero y puedo contarle todo. Repaso mi vida bajo la luz de su alma. Todo adquiere un sentido nuevo. Martín es ese otro yo con el que todos hablamos" (165) [Now I realize that I have been living my life, day after day, to tell it to Martín, although I didn't know it, or even him, then...I want to tell Martín

everything. I review my life under the light of his soul. Everything acquires new meaning. Martín is that other me with whom we all talk]\*.

Adding to the absence that naturally exists in the act of writing is the fact that none of the written correspondence between Violeta and Baptiste, Tomás, or Martín ever appear in the narrative. Although Violeta claims to be in nearly constant communication with all of them at certain points in the narrative, one never finds the actual words either she or her narratees use to communicate. In other words, there is never any actual evidence that the written correspondences exist. Moreover, there is virtually no dialogue presented throughout the entire text; nearly all of the words are those of the narrator. Thus, once again, the narratee only has access to Violeta's own written narration.

This raises the question of why Violeta finds it important to write rather than speak as her preferred method of communication. In general, one must use language to communicate. The chosen medium through which communication should take place, however, has been a source of contestation throughout history. From Plato and Aristotle to Rousseau, Saussure, and Hegel, theorists have traditionally favored speech over writing as the most effective means of communication. They believe that, "Spoken words are symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 103). Essentially, writing is seen as a supplement of speech, used to communicate with someone who is not immediately present. Derrida, on the other hand, argues against the metaphysics of presence and the belief that writing is inferior to speech by claiming that all meaning is based on absence. Once again, he lays forth the three major absences on which writing relies: "All writing...in order to be what it is, must



be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee in general,” (*Margins of Philosophy* 315-16); “For the written to be written, it must continue to ‘act’ and to be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written...” (*Margins of Philosophy* 316); and finally, “By the same token, a written sign carries with it a force of breaking with its context, that is, the set of presences which organize the moment of its inscription” (*Signature Event Context* 317).

In his article, “Playing Doubles: Derrida’s Writing,” Peter W. Nesselroth provides an explanation of the implications of Derrida’s theory of writing that may help uncover why Violeta prefers to write rather than speak. He states that, “Even in its narrow, everyday sense, writing is capable of producing meaning(s) that are quite independent of the spoken, i.e., diacritical marks, hyphens, capital letters, spacing, punctuation, etc. – signs whose meanings rely on the visual instead of the aural or on both...” (429). Ever since she was young, Violeta has struggled to express herself through spoken words. The meaning she creates in her life is based on absences and presences. Perhaps it is only through writing, where again meaning depends on both absence and presence, visual and spatial, that she feels she can finally communicate effectively with others.

The one person with whom she feels unable to communicate, unfortunately, is her husband, Luis. As mentioned above, Luis is an engineer. He cannot relate to Violeta’s obsession with words, even telling her at one point before their marriage: “Olvídate de las letras, de las palabras y de las vergüenzas...” (154) [Forget about letters, words, and shames...]\*. Immediately before and after their wedding, she finds herself regretting her decision to get married. She writes to Baptiste to express her feelings, saying, “Le escribí

a Baptiste que quería y amaba a Luis, pero que a la vez no le amaba, o que tal vez yo pensaba que el amor debía ser otra cosa, no aquel querer a medias, a ratos sí y a ratos no, no aquel acostumbramiento a las costumbres de Luis y a los silencios que se instalaban entre nosotros muchos días” (201) [I wrote to Baptiste that I loved and cared for Luis, but at the same time I didn’t love him. Or maybe I thought that love should be something else, not half-loving, at times yes, other times no. Not being accustomed to Luis’s habits and to the silences that grew between us many days]\*.

Violeta was not always silent with Luis, however. In fact, when they first meet, she is surprised by her ability to talk in front of him; but, perhaps in a moment of foreshadowing, she states, “Me pregunté entonces cómo alguien que medía la belleza de las palabras podía besar a alguien que medía la belleza de los materiales. Pero no se me ocurrió la respuesta en ese momento y, después, se me olvidó volver a preguntármelo (146) [I asked myself then how someone who measured beauty by words could kiss someone who measured beauty by materials. But the answer didn’t occur to me in that moment, and after, I forgot to ask myself again]\*. As the relationship progresses, Luis’s passion for materials and his inability to understand Violeta’s passion for words result in an imposed silence on Violeta.

In his essay, “Discourse in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin posits that meaningful dialogue depends not only upon the intentions of the speaker, but also on the anticipated response of the listener. “Responsive understanding,” he argues, “is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an *active* understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse”

(*The Dialogic Imagination* 280-81). When Luis tells Violeta to forget about words, when he refuses to provide the responsive understanding she needs for her own understanding, Violeta finds herself in a situation in which she only has access to passive understanding. The consequence of this, as Bakhtin explains, is that, "...nothing new can be introduced into (the speaker's) discourse; there can be no new aspects in his discourse relating to concrete objects and emotional expressions. Indeed the purely negative demands, such as could only emerge from a passive understanding...leave the speaker in his own personal context, within his own boundaries..." (281). This is precisely why, following the wedding, Violeta feels as though "Las palabras se fueron todas y me abandonaron. Entraban en mí y se paseaban indiferentes por mi mente, sin darme ningún consuelo" (195) [All the words left and abandoned me. They entered in me and passed indifferently through my mind, without giving me any comfort]\*. According to Bakhtin:

In the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreements of disagreement. To some extent, primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle: it creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 282)

Without any response from Luis, Violeta's endless search for meaning in words becomes futile and she is trapped in marriage surrounded by silence.

Despite the distinct lack of communication, however, and Violeta's recurring doubts about her future possibility of happiness, the marriage between her and Luis does not result in a complete failure. Before her pregnancy, Violeta is convinced that she has

made a mistake by marrying Luis and, as previously mentioned, she begins having an affair with a young doctor named Edouard. Their relationship grows more and more serious, and eventually Violeta comes to the decision to leave Luis and start a new life with Eduoard. Rather than speaking to Luis, however, Violeta writes him a note before setting off to Eduoard's house: "Le escribí que me marchaba, que sentía hacerlo así, pero que necesitaba estar lejos unos días antes de poder hablar con él cara a cara...No arranqué la hoja, sino que la dejé en la libreta y el bolígrafo encima. No firmé" (270) [I wrote to him that I was leaving, that I was sorry to do it like this, but that I needed to be away for a few days before I could talk to him face to face...I didn't tear out the piece of paper, but rather I left it in the notebook and the pen on top. I didn't sign it]\*. As this unsigned letter waits undiscovered on the desk, Violeta begins her walk to Eduoard's house and a potentially new life.

As she walks away from her former life with Luis, Violeta describes the scenery in detail; she imagines what her new life will be like with Edouard; she avoids thinking about how her decision will affect Luis. When she sits down to rest a moment, something happens that completely changes her trajectory: she witnesses, by chance, a horrible accident when a bus flies through the red light and crashes into a car. The scene around her is chaos. She explains, "Todo esto lo vi y lo escuché sin moverme del semáforo, con la maleta aún en el suelo y la mochila pesándome en la espalda, sin comprender qué podía significar todo aquello" (276) [I saw and heard everything without moving away from the light, with my suitcase still on the ground and my backpack weighing on my spine, without understanding what all of it could mean]\*. It is not until Violeta hears the

cries of a child that she realizes what has happened and goes to help an elderly woman who was riding on the bus. The woman tells Violeta repeatedly that she was on the way to her son's house to bring some sweets for her sick grandson. The sounds of the child's cry and the woman's statement are still clear in Violeta's head when a police officer asks her to make a statement about what she witnessed. Finally, he tells her to go home and rest and Violeta does just that: "Volví a casa, a la casa de Luis, a mi casa, donde me esperaban las gatas...Rompí la nota que había escrito para Luis en muchos pedazos y la tiré a la basura" (278-79) [I returned home, to Luis's house, to my house, where my cats were waiting for me. I tore up the note that I had written Luis into many pieces and threw it in the garbage]\*. After falling asleep for hours, Violeta awakens and writes an email to Edouard telling him that their relationship is over.

What is it exactly that makes Violeta change her mind? Why does she return to Luis after she had finally decided to leave him for Edouard? From the very beginning of the novel, Violeta constantly refers to herself as "...ni lo uno ni lo otro; o mejor, las dos cosas a la vez" (12) [...not one or the other; or better yet, both things at once]\*. This phrase, 'ni lo uno ni lo otro,' immediately calls to mind Søren Kierkegaard's work, *Either/Or, A Fragment of Life*, which expounds on the differences between an aesthetic and ethical existence. The first part of the work is dedicated to presenting the aesthetic through "The Papers of A". It begins with the well-known statement, "Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way" (*The Essential Kierkegaard* 43). Essentially, one can either do this, or do that...one way or the other he/she will regret his/her decision. In order to avoid this

displeasure, and maintain the eternal pleasure of possibility, A suggests not choosing at all. As John D. Caputo explains, “The whole idea in ‘aestheticism’ is to station oneself decisively in the field of indecision and freedom from choice” (*How to Read Kierkegaard* 27).

In *Mi vida según Martín*, prior to witnessing the accident, Violeta embodies this indecision of the aesthetic. At times, she is convinced she must leave Luis for Edouard, and other times, she is determined to end her affair with Edouard. She states that, “Estaba frente a una bifurcación y no sabía qué camino tomar. Quizá era demasiado cobarde para elegir uno de los dos caminos y soportar después los sufrimientos por haberme confundido” (265) [I was in front of a fork in the road and I didn’t know which path to take. Perhaps I was too much of a coward to choose one of the two paths and later bear the suffering of having been mistaken]\*. Even when Violeta seems to have decided, the fact that she leaves a note for Luis rather than speak to him in person gives her ample opportunity to change her mind before Luis arrives home from work.

Returning to Kierkegaard, the second part of *Either/Or* presents Judge William’s defense of the ethical stage of existence over the aesthetic. While the aesthetic believes both sides of a choice will result in regret, and thus one should avoid choosing, the ethical stage of existence consists precisely in choosing and remaining steadfast to that choice. As Judge William explains: “The choice itself is crucial for the content of the personality: through the choice the personality submerges itself in that which is being chosen, and when it does not choose, it withers away in atrophy” (*The Essential Kierkegaard* 72). He continues: “What takes precedence in my *Either/Or* is, then, the ethical. Therefore, the

point is still not that of choosing something; the point is not the reality of that which is chosen but the reality of choosing” (75). In order to exemplify the benefit of not only choosing, but also staying true to one’s choice, Judge William uses the example of marriage. Once one has chosen to marry, she must, in a sense, continue to choose that same person everyday. Marital love, he says, “...is faithful, constant, humble, patient, long-suffering, tolerant, honest, content with little, alert, persevering, willing, happy. All these virtues have the characteristic that they are qualifications within the individual. The individual is not fighting against external enemies but is struggling with himself, struggling to bring his love out of himself” (71). In other words, while the aesthetic is only concerned with himself, the ethical sphere of existence consists of extending that concern and love to others, to one’s family.

When Violeta witnesses the accident on her way to Edouard’s house, she is struck by the cries of the baby and the words of the woman who was going to visit her son and grandchild – she is surrounded by the anxiety of families. Her decision to return to the home she shares with Luis, to return to her husband, constitutes the moment in which she chooses the ethical over the aesthetic. Violeta stops thinking only of herself and begins thinking of her family and her desire to have a child. Significantly, it is not until she transitions into the ethical sphere of existence that she is finally able to conceive the child for which she and Luis have longed. The fact that her marriage is saved, quite literally, by accident does not imply that Violeta and Luis live ‘happily ever after’, however. On the contrary, Violeta still finds the need to create Martín, her mysterious interlocutor, even after she has chosen to embrace the ethical sphere of existence and dedicate herself to her

family. This once again raises the questions of why Martín and his ‘existence’ are so crucial to Violeta’s quest to find meaning within her life, and why he is no longer necessary after Violeta begins communicating with her son through sign language.

When Violeta first decides to study languages, she cites a curiosity to know if words are enough to describe everything. When she meets Luis, she begins to experience things that she cannot describe in words: “Aprendí a abrazar y besar. Descubrí mis labios y mis brazos...y todo aquello que no se puede expresar porque está hecho de materiales inexpresables y casi imposible encontrar letras que se ajusten a su exacta forma y sentido” (154) [I learned to hug and kiss. I discovered my lips and my arms...and all that which one cannot express because it’s made of inexpressible materials and is almost impossible to find letters that fit the exact form and meaning]\*. When Luis first returns to Pamplona with her to meet her family, she wonders “...qué podía resultar de aquellas raras combinaciones de ricos y pobres, de cocineras y grandes señores, de agricultores, tapiceros e ingenieros, de palabras y materiales...” (157) [...what could be the result of those strange combinations of rich and poor, of cooks and great men, of farmers, upholsterers, and engineers, of words and materials...]\*. In both of these instances, it is evident that Violeta fully believes in the traditional binaries of words versus materials, language versus reality, mind versus body. Through Martín, she is able to escape materials, reality, and her body in order to immerse herself in a world of words, language, and the mind. She states that, “Hasta llegar a Martín no había descubierto el consuelo escondido en algunas frases, como si ellas solas, sin más ayuda, pudieran encontrar el largo recorrido que conduce hasta el alma de las personas, como si tuvieran brazos para



abrazar y un pecho robusto donde respirara la felicidad” (69) [Until the arrival of Martín, I hadn’t discovered the comfort hidden in some phrases, as if they alone, without any help, could find the long path that leads to people’s soul, as if they had arms with which to hug and a robust chest where happiness breathes]\*. Words, however, do not have arms; they do not have lungs with which to breathe, they cannot replace corporeal experience. According to phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “...my body is not merely one object among all others, not a complex of sensible qualities among others. It is an object sensitive to all others, which resonates for all sounds, vibrates for all colors, and that provides words with their primordial signification through the manner in which it receives them” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 245). Violeta, it seems, has attempted to uncover the signification of words without exposing herself to the embodied experience of them and thus, embodied reality.

In her article, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” Karen Barad argues that, “Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretive turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every ‘thing’ – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation” (120). She challenges the dichotomy of language versus reality by asking, “If words are untethered from the material world, how do representations gain a foothold” (130)? In *Mi vida según Martín*, Violeta consistently avoids the material world, she tries repeatedly to exist solely in the world of words and language until she is forced to encounter embodiment through her pregnancy. Significantly, it is an embodied experience that begins to change her: “Por fin

había sucedido aquel acto sublime de sufrimiento, encarnado en su manifestación más corporal, que a veces había imaginado en los meses anteriores. Me había desmayado” (294) [At last that sublime act of suffering happened, embodied in the most corporeal manifestation, that I had sometimes imagined in the previous months. I fainted]\*. It is this corporeal experience that leads Violeta to the hospital where she discovers she is pregnant. Although she holds onto the hope of returning to the world of spoken language after the birth of her son, his inability to participate in this world leaves her no other choice than to once again find another way through the symbolic order of spoken language and participate in his embodied world of sign language. Finally, when the apparent possibility of meeting Martín presents itself, Violeta concedes:

Después de buscar las palabras durante tantos años, me he dado cuenta de que las cosas verdaderamente importantes no necesitan de ellas, o al menos no necesitan de la voz ni de los sonidos. Todo el amor del mundo cabe en una mirada. Sin embargo, con Martín, solo he tenido hasta ahora las palabras. Lo que he descubierto, al fin, es que las palabras, como yo, son una cosa y su contraria. A veces sí y a veces no. Lo son todo y no son nada. (273)

[After looking for words for so many years, I have realized that the truly important things have no need for them, or at least they have no need for a voice or sounds. All the love in the world fits in a glance. However, with Martín, I’ve only ever had words. What I’ve discovered, at last, is that words, like me, are one thing and the other. Sometimes yes, sometimes no. They are everything and they are nothing]\*.

Violeta learns, through reflecting on and narrating her life, that the phallogocentric belief in the supremacy of the spoken word is not a sufficient means of representing and understanding herself. It is through her embodied experience of language with her son, however, that she finally embraces a lived, embodied reality and moves beyond the binaries that separate mind and body, reason and emotion, and most importantly,

language and reality. Once again, the question ceases to be one of 'either/or,' and becomes for Violeta a matter of 'both/and.'

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of metanarration is the act of narrating itself.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida refers to binary oppositions in many of his works, including *Of Grammatology* and *Positions*.

<sup>3</sup> The symbolic in Lacan might be the equivalent of the superego in Freud.

<sup>4</sup> The imaginary in Lacan might be the equivalent of the semiotic in Kristeva.

<sup>5</sup> The reconciliation or synthesis between the imaginary and the symbolic might be the equivalent of the ego in Freud.

<sup>6</sup> As previously mentioned, Derrida explains the deconstructive strategy of writing in *Of Grammatology*.

#### CHAPTER 4: TEMPORAL INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN *VIOLETAS PARA OLIVIA*

Much like Sara Barrena, who is most well known for her philosophical work rather than a writer of fiction, Julia Montejo specializes primarily in journalism, screenwriting, and film/television production and direction. She has published three fictional novels: *Eva desnuda* [Naked Eva]\* (2006), *Violetas para Olivia* [Violets for Olivia]\* (2011), and *Lo que tengo que contarte* [What I Have to Tell You]\* (2015). In this chapter, the theoretical analysis will concentrate on her second novel, *Violetas para Olivia*. The novel tells the story of three generations of women from the Martínez Durango family, focusing primarily on Madelaine, the sole heir to the family's legacy.

In contrast to the previous works studied, both of which represent the importance of the act of narrating as a means of achieving some sort of subjective understanding of one's experiences or of oneself, the narrative trajectory of *Violetas para Olivia* does not focus directly on the act of narrating. Rather, it demonstrates the ways in which the meaning of one's experiences and one's subjectivity are constructed by narrative. The ideas of time (past, present, and future), absence, genetic determinism, and experience are all central themes throughout the narrative. This chapter will explore each in detail in order to uncover how the narrative reinforces the concept that truth, meaning, and selfhood are never stable, fixed elements waiting to be discovered, but are constantly dependent upon and reconstructed through subjective interpretation.

As mentioned above, the story revolves around three generations of women from the Martínez Durango family. The main character, Madelaine, a young doctor who is the sole heir to the family's financial and social legacy, returns to her childhood home

following the death of her aunt determined to finally uncover the secrets that seem to surround her family. She hopes to find some type of explanation for why she is who she is, why her grandmother, Olivia, has been virtually erased from the family's history, and why her mother, Inmaculada, abandoned her before dying in a car accident.

Unlike the other two novels, in which the narrators are homodiegetic, the narrator of *Violetas para Olivia* is a heterodiegetic, omniscient narrator, or "...a narrator who is not a character in the situations and events s/he recounts," (*Dictionary Prince* 40) and "...who knows (practically) everything about the situations and events recounted" (*Dictionary Prince* 68). This type of narrator allows the narrative to employ what is perhaps one of its most notable features, which is discordance between the order of the story and the order of the discourse. Throughout the novel, the narrative continuously shifts from the present moment, 2008, to what appear to be past moments spanning from 1938 and various years in between. In order to explore the function of these imbedded past scenes, one can utilize Gérard Genette's theory of anachrony as explained in *Narrative Discourse*. According to Genette, anachronies are "...various types of discordance between the two orderings of the story and narrative..." (36). They can be classified as either prolepsis, "...any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later..." (40), or analepsis, "...any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment..." (40).<sup>1</sup> Within *Violetas para Olivia*, one finds the presence of both types of anachronies in the story of Madelaine's search for truth and the direct narration of the past.

At first glance, many of the anachronies appear to be presented in a random order due to the fluctuation of dates in which they occur. However, upon closer examination, one finds that most of them fulfill specific functions within the narrative at the time that they appear. Before discussing the theoretical significance of these anachronies, it is important to understand how they function within the text. At times, the narrator presents moments from the past in order to explain the narrative around which Madelaine has constructed her selfhood in the present. These anachronies typically appear to be called forth directly by involuntary memories resulting from Madelaine's experiences in the present. For example, shortly after Madelaine returns to the family home in San Gabriel, she ventures into the library and stumbles upon her mother's collection of old books written by Iris Murdoch. The narrator then presents a jovial conversation, beginning with Madelaine's mother Inmaculada's comments on Iris Murdoch, between her and her mother that took place in 1976 when Madelaine was a child. In the present, the narrator explains that, "Haciendo un poco de autopsicología barata, se daba cuenta de que sus relaciones sentimentales podrían explicarse desde el trauma del abandono. Su madre, la persona más importante de su vida...había desaparecido de la noche a la mañana, sin ni siquiera despedirse..." (37) [Doing a bit of cheap psychology on herself, she realized that all of her emotional relationships could be explained by the trauma of the abandonment. Her mother, the most important person in her life...had disappeared one night, without even saying goodbye...]\*. The conversation from 1976, which seems to be called forth directly by Madelaine's encounter with the books, reinforces the fact that for Madelaine,

the departure of her mother was completely unforeseen, and thus justifies her continuing sense of abandonment and fear of commitment in the present.<sup>2</sup>

At other times, the stories from the past seem to have a more explanatory function in the present. For example, following Madelaine's conversation with her aunt Clara about Clara's mother Olivia, Madelaine notices her aunt acting strangely. The narrator immediately transports the narratee to 1955 when Olivia confronts Clara about her relationship with a man named Manuel - a man with whom Olivia herself had a relationship prior to marrying Néstor. Through this narration, the narratee discovers both Clara's justification in her anger towards her mother, as well as an obscure introduction to Olivia's motive for ensuring that her daughter ends her relationship with Manuel. However, it is important to note that while these anachronies provide essential information to the narratee, they do not appear to contribute to Madelaine's narrative understanding of the past, as she technically does not have access to these narrations.

Finally, there are other moments in which the narrations from the past appear to have an overt influence on the present moment of the narrative. A powerful example of this is found immediately after the narrator tells the story of Rodrigo, Madelaine's father, raping Inmaculada in 1971. Shifting back to the present, the narrator explains: "De repente un terror la invadió (a Madelaine). Un presentimiento del pasado. ¿Fue ella producto de una violación?" (160) [All of a sudden, a terror overcame her. A premonition from the past. Was she the product of rape?]\*. The blurred feeling between the past and the present is strong here for both the narratee and for Madelaine. How is it possible that someone can have a premonition, which typically refers to the future, about the past? It

also leads one to question whether or not Madelaine has been in some way conscious of the other past narrations that occur throughout the narrative of which she is not directly involved.

From a narratological viewpoint, all of the narrations about the past appear to represent external analepses, which Genette explains, "...never at any moment risk interfering with the first narrative for their only function is to fill out the first narrative by enlightening the reader on one or another 'antecedent'" (49-50). In other words, since the story seems to be anchored in 2008, the past narrations relay a story that took place before the present story time and appear throughout the text in order to provide necessary background details that contribute to the narratee's understanding of the story. However, upon closer examination, one realizes this is not particularly the case in *Violetas para Olivia*. It is, in fact, the past that is narrated in the present tense, while the main story set in 2008 is narrated primarily in the imperfect. As a result, what originally appeared to be an analepsis can also be interpreted as what Genette refers to as an external prolepsis in the sense that it is referring to something that has not yet taken place in the narrative of the past. Moreover, as will be discussed later, the past stories not only interfere with the present narrative, but they also have a direct impact on it. This greatly contributes to Madelaine's constant feeling that the past and present are intertwined, and that one (the past or the present) can continue to alter what was believed to be true in the other. As Paul Ricoeur explains in *Time and Narrative*:

...the repetition of a story, governed as a whole by its way of ending, constitutes an alternative to the representation of time flowing from the past toward the future, following the well-known metaphor of the 'arrow of time.' It is as though recollection inverted the so-called 'natural' order



of time. In reading the ending in the beginning and the beginning in the ending, we also learn to read time itself backwards... (*Volume I* 67-68).

By consistently jumping from the present to the past and narrating the present in the past and the past in the present, the narrative trajectory in *Violetas para Olivia* seems to go even further in this disorientation of the ‘natural order of time.’ In order to begin to make sense of her past, and that of her ancestors, Madelaine must see beyond the traditional linear nature of time and essentially learn to ‘read time’ in an alternative order.

The structure of the novel is not only significant for the characters, however; it also might have an impact on the real reader. In an interview, Julia Montejo justifies her decision for the organization of the narrative, stating:

He pretendido que el lector tuviera la impresión de que el tiempo no es tiempo, es decir, es algo que el hombre ha creado para poner orden en las cosas, pero en realidad cuando analizamos a una persona, ésta no es su tiempo presente, sino es consecuencia de muchas vidas anteriores. Somos lo que hemos hecho, pero también somos lo que han hecho nuestros antepasados, por eso hay una ruptura del tiempo. Es una forma de contar una historia que está rota pero unida para hacer un todo orgánico entre pasado y presente.

[I hope that the reader will have the impression that time isn't time, in other words, it's something that man has created to put things in order. In reality, when we analyze a person, it isn't who they are in the present, but rather the result of many previous lives. We are that which we have done, but we're also that which our ancestors have done, for this there's a breakdown of time. It's a way of telling a story that's broken but connected in order to make an organic whole between the past and present]\*

Through the non-chronological organization of the story, the narratee is also forced to make sense of the events in the narrative in a nonlinear manner, which allows him/her to be able to directly share Madelaine's experience, her feeling that she describes to José Luis, the financial advisor to the family, “Que el curso de tiempo está perdiendo la

lógica...Ya no va hacia delante...Ahora ya no siento que el tiempo sea algo lineal. Hacia atrás también pasan cosas, o han pasado cosas que se pueden descubrir y así cambiar nuestro presente. Ahora menos aquí, en San Gabriel” (188) [That the course of time is losing its logic...It’s no longer going forward...Now I don’t feel like time is something linear. Things also happen backwards, or things have happened that one can discover and then change our present. Especially here, in San Gabriel]\*.

A theme strongly associated with these anachronies throughout the narrative is that of memory and its role in both the construction of Madelaine’s selfhood in the present and her search for truth and justice in the past. References to memory are found throughout the entire text, beginning with the name Madelaine, which her mother explains she chose:

Porque yo quisiera que no olvide que solo el pasado es real. El futuro no existe todavía y en el presente no tenemos conciencia temporal. El presente es solo algo accidental, como para Proust fue comer una Magdalena, el presente puede llevarnos al pasado y así darnos cuenta de que solo el tiempo pasado, que ya es un tiempo perdido, tiene valor. (190) [Because I don’t want her to forget that only the past is real. The future still doesn’t exist and in the present we have no temporal conscience. The present is only something accidental, like when Proust ate a madeleine, the present can carry us to the past and then we realize that only the past, which is already lost, has any value]\*.

Critics who are familiar with Proust will immediately recognize the reference to the madeleine episode from *In Search of Lost Time*, which represents the idea of involuntary memory. While the concept of determinism will be explored later, it is important to note that by giving her a Proustian name, Inmaculada has also given her a selfhood, a future, based in not forgetting the past. Later in the novel, Madelaine discovers a secret letter written to her mother from her aunt Rosario hidden in a book by Rilke. As Lorna Martens

points out in *Promise of Memory: Childhood Recollection and Its Objects in Literary Modernism*, “Proust in France and Rilke, who had left Prague for good and lived here and there in Europe before making Paris his preferred base, had experiences that involved the serendipitous recovery of forgotten memories...Each writer set about re-creating his childhood memories in works that straddle the boundary between autobiography and fiction” (2). In *Violetas para Olivia*, the recovery of forgotten memories, along with the blurring between truth and fiction, past and present, all contribute to Madelaine’s need to reconstruct her family’s past and come to terms with her own selfhood.

Most theories on involuntary memory, including those of Proust and Rilke, emphasize the connection between memory and both things and places. For Madelaine, the memories of her childhood spring forth from her encounters with the things from her past in San Gabriel. According to Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands in “Landscape, Memory, and Forgetting”, the association between memory and place signifies a particular embodied experience of memory. She states that, “The act of remembering involves a recognition of a relationship between the body/mind and the external world that is not only determined by internal forces,” (274) and she posits that, “...memory does not only reside in the mind, but rather in the complex interrelations among bodies, minds, and landscapes” (279). In *Violetas para Olivia*, both Madelaine’s experiences and her memories are explicitly embodied. She must be physically in San Gabriel, surrounded by the landscape of her childhood in order to remember, and she begins to literally feel the presence of her ancestors and even (apparently) gain access to their memories.

However, as the narrator reminds us, not all memories are reliable:

Un recuerdo que no era tal, sino una construcción de dudosa objetividad. Ya había podido comprobar que los recuerdos pocas veces son compartidos con exactitud: cada persona los almacena según su propia vivencia y esta puede hacer variar el hecho radicalmente. Madelaine no recordaba a su madre junto a aquella librería, esa es concreto. Unas estanterías de madera de pino emergieron de sus recuerdos. (36)

[A memory that wasn't exactly that, but rather a construction of a doubtful objectivity. They could already prove that memories are hardly ever shared with exactitude: each person stores them according to their own life and this can make them radically different. Madelaine didn't remember her mother along with that library, this is certain. Her memories sprang forth from some of the pine wood bookshelves]\*.

Moreover, at one point in the story José Luis mentions the work of Plato, stating that, “Sócrates decía que todo aprendizaje es recuerdo...Yo siempre he pensado que si se heredan los rasgos físicos y de carácter, ¿por qué no los recuerdos, o los afectos, las pasiones y, tal vez, incluso las presencias” (146) [Socrates said that all learning is remembering...I have always thought that if one can inherit physical characteristics, why not memories, or attachments, passions, and sometimes, even presences]\*? He is referring, of course, to Socrates' dialogue with Meno in which he explains that the soul is immortal and as such, it already has knowledge of all things, and that which we call 'learning' is a process of 'recollection.' The question of inheritance, and whether or not one can actually inherit memories, is one that Madelaine finds herself asking various times throughout the narrative when she feels as though the past is still very much present in the Martínez Durango home. In other words, the dichotomy between past and present is deconstructed.

The task of deconstruction, as proposed by Derrida, consists of exposing binary oppositions that traditionally privilege one term over the other in order to demonstrate the

ways in which both terms depend upon each other for meaning. As Derrida explains in

*Positions*:

I am attempting to pursue...a kind of general strategy of deconstruction. The latter is to avoid both simply neutralizing the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply residing within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it.

Therefore we must proceed using a double gesture, according to a unity that is both systematic and in and of itself multiple...On the other hand, we must traverse a phase of overturning. To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy (41).

From the very beginning of the novel, nearly all of Madelaine's family is physically absent from the present time of the narrative. Her aunt Rosario has recently passed away and the narrator explains that when Madelaine was merely a child, "...de repente eran solo tres. Su abuela, su padre y su madre ya nunca volverían" (15-16) [...all of a sudden they were only three. Her grandmother, her father, and her mother would never return]\*. It is precisely these absences, along with the mystery surrounding them, which inspires Madelaine to explore her past in hopes of discovering the truth about what happened to her family.

Although Olivia, Rodrigo, Inmaculada, and Rosario are all physically absent from the present time of the story, however, they are very much present throughout the discourse of the narrative and even in Madelaine's life. Each of the analepses in the novel takes place in the past (yet narrated in the present tense) when all of the absent characters are still present, and these characters continue to have an effect on Madelaine. She states that, "Es que siento como si en la casa estuvieron todavía mi madre, mi abuela, mi tía, mi padre incluso. No sé si en la casa o dentro de mí. También los he sentido en el pueblo, en

esta plaza...” (146) [It’s that I feel like my mom, my grandma, my aunt, and even my dad are still here in the house. I don’t know if they’re in the house or inside of me. I’ve also felt them in the town, in this plaza...]\*. Once again, the question of heredity and precisely what she has inherited from her ancestors becomes intertwined with Madelaine’s quest to solve the mystery surrounding her family, and forces Madelaine to initiate and accomplish a deconstruction not only of the concepts of past and present, but also of genetic determinism.

The novel begins with a quote by Ortega y Gasset: “Lo que diferencia al hombre del animal es que el hombre es heredero y no mero descendiente” [The difference between man and animal is that man is hereditary, not simply a descendent]\*. Etymologically speaking, a descendent merely implies “An individual proceeding from an ancestor in any degree” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*) whereas hereditary implies, something “inherited; of or relating to an inheritance” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). It is strongly suggested that much of who Madelaine is and the course of her life are determined by heredity; her only destiny is to fulfill her role as the heir to the Martínez Durango legacy. The narrator remarks on the personality traits that Madelaine has inherited from her ancestors, specifically her grandmother Olivia:

...la genética de Olivia había quedado impresa no en su físico, sino en su carácter. Por supuesto, las circunstancias de su vida no tenían nada que ver y, claro está, también hay que contar la dosis del libre albedrío, pero sí, definitivamente, Madelaine y Olivia tenían mucho en común, y, en concreto, una tendencia natural a cometer el mismo tipo de errores. (14)  
[...the genetics of Olivia had always been impressed on her, not physically, but in her character. Of course, the circumstances of her life had something to do with it, clearly, free will has to be considered. But yes, definitively, Madelaine and Olivia had much in common and, in concrete, a natural tendency to commit the same type of mistakes]\*.

The fact that Madelaine will eventually be the last surviving member of the Martínez Durango family means not only is she marked by heredity, but she will also be the recipient of significant financial inheritance. As her aunt Clara explains to her: “Es tu destino. Acéptalo de una vez y crece. Pertenecer a esta familia, ser la heredera de una estirpe de mujeres que ha producido ejemplares tan extraordinarios como tu abuela, o tu bisabuela, es un honor” (262) [It’s your destiny. Accept it for once and move on. Belonging to this family, being the heir to a line of women who have produced models as extraordinary as your grandmother, or your great-grandmother, is an honor]\*. Eventually, even Madelaine begins to believe that her life is not hers to control. Thoughts come into her head, words that she does not remember ever hearing; memories of things that happened before she was born seem to present themselves to her as if they are her own memories; even her own emotions and actions at times appear foreign to her, as if they belong to someone else. As the narrator posits, “...¿quién era ella sino producto de todo lo que la había precedido, de los actos y las decisiones de los anteriores?” (118) [...who was she if not the product of everything that had come before her, of the acts and decisions of her ancestors?]\*.

Nevertheless, the idea that one is not in control of his or her destiny frightens Madelaine. She is a well-educated, modern woman who has traveled all over the world. While she cannot deny that one inherits physical traits from his or her ancestors, she cannot accept that her destiny is already determined, especially since the past makes her own future seem very grim. She states:

Si estoy marcada, si no solo mi cuerpo, sino mi alma y mi mente son de otros, ¿qué espacio me queda para ser feliz? La verdad es que quizá, si viniera de otro tipo de familia, me importaría menos. Pero yo siento que nadie en nuestra casa ha tenido jamás amor. No quiero que conmigo se repita la historia. Y yo no creo en la mala suerte. No al menos en forma persistente. Si todos ellos han sido unos desgraciados, ha sido por su culpa, porque lo han hecho mal. Me niego a pensar que exista ninguna otra razón. Ellos fueron responsables como yo lo soy de mi vida. (147)

[If I'm marked, if not only my body, but also my soul and my mind are from others, what space does that leave me for happiness? The truth is that maybe, if I had come from a different type of family, it wouldn't be as important. But I feel like no one in our house has ever had love. I don't want this history to repeat itself with me. And I don't believe in bad luck, at least not in a persistent way. If they have all been unlucky, it's their own fault, because they did wrong. I refuse to think it's for any other reason. They were responsible, just like I'm responsible for my own life]\*.

Stating definitively that her ancestors were responsible for their own misfortunes is a bold statement, however. There is no denying that the history of the Martínez Durango family is shrouded in mystery, so unless truth about the lives and deaths of the family members is uncovered, it is unclear as to whether or not each individual was completely responsible for their misfortunes.

As the eventual last surviving member of the Martínez Durango family, Madelaine is the only one who can bring the truth to light, and she must do so not only for her family members, but also for herself. As Jeffrey Blustein explains in *Moral Demands of Memory*:

...reflecting back on those who played a formative role in our lives and on our relationship to them may generate insights into how we became the sorts of persons we are and thus into our present identities...In this way, remembrance – which makes the dear departed available and accessible to us – facilitates self-understanding and self-development, which, in relation to matters of serious import, are essential ingredients of a human life that is well lived (264-65).



Even Madelaine's mother understood this concept, and used it for justification in choosing to name her daughter Madelaine: "Yo quiero que mi hija no lea la historia que le cuenten, quiero que sea capaz de encontrar la historia real porque sé que ella va a estar marcada por la familia a la que pertenece y será mejor que lo sepa, que no se engañe. Quizá así pueda liberarse y ser ella misma" (191) [I want my daughter to not read the history that they tell her, I want her to be able to find out the real history because I know she's going to be marked by the family to which she belongs and it will be better that she knows it and not be deceived. Maybe then she can be free and be herself]\*. In other words, Madelaine must learn the 'real history' of her family; she must revise and reread the narrative identities of her ancestors both for them and for herself.

As mentioned above, Madelaine was essentially orphaned at four years old, and she spends her entire adolescent and adult life believing she was selfishly abandoned as a child. However, as she reevaluates her own memories and reconstructs the stories she is told about her family, she begins to see her own identity as a Martínez Durango woman in a new light. Throughout the narrative trajectory, the powerful Martínez Durango family is in the hands of strong women who essentially take over the role of the patriarch. From Olivia, to Clara, and eventually Madelaine, the family's legacy is passed down through the women, not the men; and each of these women display many characteristics not commonly associated with the female sex. For example, from the time in which Rosario reads Clara's future, Clara realizes that her destiny is not to be a wife or a mother, but rather to fulfill the typically masculine role of protecting the family's fortune and good name, a role that even Madelaine acknowledges: "Madelaine insistió enseguida

en que su tía continuara al frente del patrimonio. Era una gran administradora, no muy querida y, a menudo, excesivamente dura, es verdad, pero siempre eficiente con los intereses de la familia Martínez Durango” (21) [Madelaine insisted promptly that her aunt had continued in the face of patrimony. She was a great administrator, not very loved, and excessively tough, it’s true, but she was always efficient with the interests of the Martínez Durango family]\*. It is precisely for this, the interests of the family, that Clara is intent on convincing Madelaine to take over her place as the rightful heir to the family’s legacy and to find a husband with whom she produce children to eventually pass on the legacy. When Madelaine argues that she should marry for love rather than choose her future husband based on his worthiness to produce her future heirs, Clara is quick to dispel any romantic notions:

(La mayoría de mujeres) Quieren seguridad, formar una familia, no estar solas, estar simplemente casadas por el estatus. Que el envoltorio sea de color rosa no quiere decir que, en el fondo de la corazón, la mujer no sepa cuáles son sus verdaderos motivos. Las mujeres somos listas, Madelaine, y ellos lo saben. A pesar de ser raza inferior, los hombres fueron capaces de inventar las telenovelas, las canciones románticas, la poesía...¡Paparruchas! Necesitaban convencer a las mujeres la belleza de algo que no existe, pero que ellos necesitan para dar rienda suelta a sus necesidades de un modo ordenado, o, más que ordenado, controlado. Ellos quieren controlar. (181)

[The majority of women want security, to form a family, to not be alone, to simply be married for the status. That they look through rose-colored glasses isn’t to say that, in the depths of her heart, a woman doesn’t know what their true motives are. As women, we’re smart, Madelaine, and they know it. Since we are of the inferior race, men were always capable of inventing soap operas, love songs poetry...Rubbish! They needed to convince women of the beauty of something that doesn’t exist, but that they need in order to put loose reins on their needs in an ordered way, or more than ordered, controlled. They want to control]\*.

Even though her desire to see Madelaine married seems incredibly traditional, the sentiments expressed by Clara here are not those typically associated with Spanish women who grew up in the 1950's. She lays out her argument for marriage much as if she is convincing a young man to take a wife in order to continue the family name rather than a young woman to take a husband. Moreover, Clara is not advocating for just any husband; she believes that Madelaine must marry Álvaro, her teenage boyfriend, in order to finally fulfill the wishes of Olivia by uniting the two families.

The narrative selfhood of Olivia, however, has been misconstrued by nearly everyone in the Martínez Durango family, and until it is corrected, Madelaine cannot fully embrace the characteristics that she has inherited from her grandmother. While many see Olivia as an unfaithful wife who wrongly abandoned her husband and children to live a more provocative lifestyle, the truth about her life is actually much different. Raised by a very strict, religious father, Olivia grew up in a rigid environment where corporal punishment was used regularly. By the time she is a teenager, the narrator states that, “Su padre está satisfecho. Tras años de educación dirigida a convertirle en una buena cristiana, el resultado es más que aceptable. Cada vez que el cabeza de familia vuelve a casa, se encuentra a una niña rubia con rostro de virgen que se convierte poco a poco en una mujer, modosa, sencilla y que agacha la cabeza cuando le hablan” (233) [Her father is satisfied. After years of education aimed at converting her into a good Christian, the results are more than acceptable. Each time the head of the family returns to the house, he finds a blonde girl with the face of a virgin who is slowly becoming a woman, modest, simple and who bows her head when people speak to her]\*. Unfortunately,

Olivia makes the mistake of falling madly in love with a young, penniless soldier named Manuel. After the war, Manuel sets out for Colombia in order to earn enough money to be worthy of asking for Olivia's hand in marriage. Shortly after his departure, however, Olivia discovers she is pregnant and finds herself in a very precarious situation – she is from a good family, unwed, and expecting a child. When she turns to Manuel's friend, Néstor, for help, he sees in her misfortune an opportunity: “¿Quién no querría una mujer así? No hay nadie más rubio, más esbelto, de una piel nívea, más parecida a la de una virgen de inmaculada belleza, de ojos más azules, de dientes más blancos...Además rica, riquísima, de una de las familias más nobles y antiguas” (243) [Who wouldn't love a woman like this? There is no one more blonde, more svelte, with such white skin, looking more like a virgin of impeccable beauty, with bluer eyes, whiter teeth...What's more, rich, incredibly rich, from one of the most noble, ancient families]\*. He convinces Olivia that Manuel could never return in time and in order to avoid scandal and save her family's honor, she must marry him. Society's expectations have forced her into a marriage with a man she does not love, and the marriage is never a happy one.

For years, Olivia endures the physical and mental abuse of her husband for the sake of her three children. There are times when she attempts to leave, but obligation to her family always calls her back. Clara spends her life blaming her mother for ruining her relationship with the only man she has ever loved, but in reality, Olivia was protecting her daughter from committing incest with Manuel, who was actually her father. When her son, Rodrigo, marries Inmaculada, it is not long before Olivia recognizes all the traits of her husband in Rodrigo and begins to fear for the future of her newly born granddaughter.

It becomes increasingly clear that Olivia's alliances are more matrilineal than genetic; she is worried about her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter while being troubled by her son.

Unlike the marriage between Olivia and Néstor into which Olivia felt forced by societal pressures, the marriage between Inmaculada and Rodrigo is one into which Inmaculada forces herself. Throughout her entire life, Inmaculada's Catholic upbringing has prohibited her from acting on her true feelings. In fact, before she meets Rodrigo and agrees to marry him, she has not even put a name to those feelings that she has suppressed; the thought of homosexuality has never consciously crossed her mind.<sup>3</sup> She agrees to marry Rodrigo in an attempt to hide her natural desires and, unfortunately, they are desires she will never be able to escape.

When she first meets Rodrigo's sister Rosario, Inmaculada continues her attempt to suppress her natural inclinations. As time progresses, however, her feelings become more uncontrollable and her relationship with Rodrigo becomes more violent and abusive. As Julia Kristeva states in her essay *About Chinese Women*, "For a woman who has not easily repressed her relationship with her mother, participation in the symbolic paternal order as Christianity defines it can only be masochistic..." (*The Kristeva Reader* 147) and "...submission to the father is experienced as punishment, pain and suffering inflicted upon the heterogeneous body" (148). For Inmaculada, submission to Rodrigo is quite literally experienced as punishment, pain and suffering. Eventually, she can no longer deny her true feelings. The narrator explains that, "Ella (Rosario) es la persona que necesita, la mitad que la va a completar. Una mujer. Una inclinación incontrolable de la

que Inmaculada pretendía huir con el casamiento, sin imaginar que Rodrigo solo había sido un vehículo para llevarla directa al abismo” (191) [She (Rosario) was the person who she needed, the half that was going to complete her. A woman. An uncontrollable inclination that Inmaculada had tried to flee from with her marriage, but never imagining that Rodrigo had simply been a vehicle to carry her directly into the abyss]\*.

Observing the relationship between her son and his young wife, Olivia realizes she must do something to save the newest addition to the Martínez Durango family from repeating the fatal cycle: “...no desea nada, except para su nieta. Salvar a su nieta del infortunio perenne de los Martínez Durango” (268) [...she didn’t want anything, except for her granddaughter. To save her granddaughter from the eternal misfortune of the Martínez Durangos]\*. One night, as she is driving with Rodrigo, “Olivia reconoce en ese instante que Rodrigo nunca sabrá ser un buen padre porque no puede. Ve. Ve un futuro que puede cambiar. Que está en sus manos” (269) [Olivia recognizes in that instant that Rodrigo will never know how to be a good father because he can’t. She sees. She sees a future that can change. That it’s in her hands]\*. She grabs the wheel of the car and provokes the accident that ends both of their lives.

Inmaculada, determined to leave the confines of the house in San Gabriel to save herself, simulates an accident, fakes her own death, and finally flees to safety. Unfortunately, despite Olivia’s ultimate sacrifice, and perhaps because of the fact that she is not biologically a Martínez Durango, Inmaculada is unable to escape with her daughter, the sole heir to the family’s legacy. When it is revealed that Madelaine’s landlord, Adela (who Madelaine often refers to as a mother figure) is in fact Inmaculada,

she explains that when she fled the house in San Gabriel, she did not know that Rodrigo was dead, and even when she finds out he is, she chose to allow Madelaine to stay with her aunts because she knew her daughter would have everything she needed there. In the moment of this revelation, one aspect of Madelaine's past is instantly rewritten. She has known Adela for years, but not known biological relationship to her; she has known her mother, but not known until now that she knew her mother. Speaking to Madelaine as her mother for the first time in over thirty years, Adela encourages Madelaine to leave San Gabriel and continue working as a doctor in Olite, feeling that, "No podía salvar a su hija de su herencia, pero quizá sí podía contribuir a que su peso fuera lo más liviano posible" (308) [She couldn't save her daughter from her inheritance, but maybe she could help make its weight as bearable as possible]\*.

Although the Martínez Durango women have been in a position of power, they have struggled against the restrictions placed on them for generations by the traditional, patriarchal society in which they live. In schizoanalytic terms, they have been territorialized in the segmentarity of phallogocentrism. Olivia is forced into an abusive marriage with a man she does not love in order to uphold the family's reputation. Inmaculada marries Rodrigo in an attempt to suppress her natural desires that are considered unacceptable in society. Both women eventually feel they must flee San Gabriel to save themselves. Their relocations, however, do nothing to deterritorialize the segmentarity of phallogocentrism. Inmaculada is forced to completely change her identity and leave her only child behind, while Olivia must return in order to secure her family's

financial and societal status. Significantly, and in contrast to her ancestors, it is not until Madelaine chooses not to leave San Gabriel that the segmentarity is deterritorialized.

Throughout the entire novel, especially while she is in San Gabriel, Madelaine is acutely aware of her pending inheritance and the circumstances into which she was born. Perhaps one of the most well known quotes by Ortega y Gasset is “I am myself plus my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself” (*Meditations on Quixote* 45). Although Ortega’s concept of ‘circunstancia’ is not specifically mentioned in the narrative, José Luis expresses a very similar idea to Madelaine, telling her, “...estás demasiado influenciada por las circunstancias, y por tu herencia...Y debes ser consciente de ello para que no te controlen” (249) [...you are influenced too much by your circumstances, by your heredity...And you should be conscious of it so they don’t control you]\*. For Madelaine, however, it is not enough that she merely become conscious of her circumstances and her heredity; she must learn to read the narratives of her ancestors in a new way in order to finally understand that her circumstances and heredity are not necessarily negative aspects of her identity. As Francisco J. Higuero explains, “...Madelaine no sólo consigue sobreponerse a los aplastantes condicionamientos emocionales arrojados sobre ella, sino que también parece desmantelarlos, aun siendo capaz de aceptar ciertos valores éticos relacionados con la herencia recibida” (2-3) [...Madelaine not only manages to overcome the powerful emotional restrictions that are thrust upon her, but she also seems to dismantle them, even being capable of accepting certain ethical values with her received inheritance]\*.



Although Madelaine chooses to stay in San Gabriel and accept her inheritance, she refuses to marry the man whom her aunt believes is best suited to carry on the family legacy. By choosing, instead, to marry José Luis, she begins to deterritorialize the traditional segmentarity that has plagued both her mother and grandmother. She embraces what Rosi Braidotti refers to as nomadic ethics. Braidotti posits that, “What nomadic ethics stands for, therefore, is a regrounding of the subject in a materially embedded sense of responsibility and ethical accountability for the environments s/he inhabits. What is at stake is the very possibility of the future, of duration or continuity”. She goes on to explain that the time frame for becomings “...is always the future anterior, that is to say, a linkage across present and past in the act of constructing and actualizing possible futures” (*Nomadic Theory* 94-95). In other words, once Madelaine begins to accept responsibility for the position of power that she has inherited, she can begin to see the present more as cartography. Braidotti states that, “A cartography is a theoretically based and politically informed reading of the present. As such it responds to my two main requirements: namely, to account for one’s location in terms of both space...and time...and to provide alternative figurations or schemes of representation for these locations in terms of power as restrictive...but also empowering or affirmative” (159). As a result of her location in time, Madelaine is able to remain in the space her family has inhabited for generations and transform the Martínez Durango power into something affirmative. At the end of the novel, she determines that, “San Gabriel era un lugar idílico para criar (los hijos), un pueblecito de la sierra limpia, tranquilo. Los Martínez Durango se integrarían por fin en el pueblo, no como dueños y señores, sino como parte de él” (317-318) [San Gabriel was

an idyllic place to raise (children), a small, white town on the clean, tranquil mountains. The Martínez Durangos would finally integrate themselves in the town, not as owners or masters, but as part of it]. This integration opens up the possibility of a more ethical, affirmative future, one in which the Martínez Durango family is no longer the subject of rumors and whispers, but rather live side by side with others in their community.

The central themes mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the ideas of time (past, present, and future), absence, and genetic determinism, all undergo a form of deconstruction in Madelaine's reexamination of the narratives of her ancestors. It is through this process that Madelaine finally embraces the multiplicity and embodiment of her own subjectivity. While she once tried to run from the past and deny both her genetic and financial inheritance, she eventually understands that it is all a part of who she is. With the hope of a better future on the horizon, the novel concludes with the statement that, finally, "...siente que ella no es otra cosa que la heredera y custodia del linaje familiar de los Martínez Durango" (318) [...she feels that she is nothing more than the heir and custodian of the Martínez Durango family lineage]. In other words, Madelaine is able to accept the responsibility of transforming her family's turbulent and somewhat scandalous past into a more ethical, affirmative future.

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<sup>1</sup> Narratological anachronies might be internal, external, or mixed, which includes those that might begin inside the narrative and go out or begin outside the narrative and go in.

<sup>2</sup> As a result of her mother's disappearance, Madelaine has experienced solitude throughout her entire life.

<sup>3</sup> It would be interesting to explore the similarities and difference between the homosexual relationship in *Secreta Penélope* with that of Inmaculada and Rosario. For example, in *Secreta Penélope*, manipulation seems to play a key role in the nature of the relationship whereas it does not appear so here.

## CHAPTER 5: TOWARDS A POSITIVE CONSTRUCTION OF INTERTEXTUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY SPANISH NOVELS

In the introduction to their collection of essays titled *Women in the Spanish Novel Today*, Kyra A. Kietrys and Monserrat Linares classify three distinct generations of female authors publishing at the turn of the millennium: “...women born in the 1920s who experienced firsthand the Spanish Civil War...women born in the 1940s and 1950s whose literary careers flourished either during the transition to democracy or shortly afterward; and finally, women born during the 1960s and 1970s who started publishing in the solidly democratic 1990s” (2). While Alicia Giménez Bartlett fits into this second generation of writers, Sara Barrena and Julia Montejo represent a new generation, one that did not begin publishing until the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They represent, essentially, the second generation of women to live and write in a democratic Spain. With greater distance from the political turmoil of the past, these writers shift their focus away from history and focus instead on the intrahistory of Spanish women.<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, in *Paz en la guerra*, Miguel de Unamuno uses the ocean as a metaphor to differentiate between history and intrahistory. The waves of the ocean represent history, while the bottom of the sea represents intrahistory. In other words, it is the intrahistories of individuals and everyday life that form the foundation and basis of understanding history, not the major events with seemingly historical significance. By comparing and contrasting the structures and themes of these three novels, this chapter will provide a phenomenological and hermeneutic analysis of the significance of these narratives on an intertextual level. It will examine the ways in which, when taken together, they convey a meaning that extends

beyond the individual texts to represent certain aspects of cultural, female, and human experiences in 21<sup>st</sup> century Spain.

Beginning with the structure of the narratives, it is important to reiterate that each novel features a female main character, but that there are differences when it comes to the narratorial perspective. The homodiegetic narrator of *Secreta Penélope* and the autodiegetic narrator of *Mi vida según Martín* are both women, while there is no overt indication of the gender of the heterodiegetic narrator of *Violetas para Olivia*. The distinct type of narrator in each narrative is significant to their functional role. One of the prominent structural similarities is the use of anachronies. All three novels offer a clear distinction between the time of the discourse and the time of the story with a narrator who freely jumps between the two. In *Secreta Penélope*, the narrator must utilize prolonged analepses in order to provide the narratee with specific details about the main character's life, as she is absent from the present moment of the story. On the other hand, Violeta in *Mi vida según Martín* uses anachrony as a means to explain why she has created an imaginary narratee in the present. Finally, one of the most notable features of *Violetas para Olivia* is the discordance between the order of the story and the order of the discourse. Here the anachronies appear to function in a variety of ways, including explanation of the past, explanation of the present, and even as a means of influencing the present.

According to Emma Kafalenos, "...anachronies are motivated by focalization – the writer's selection of whose perceptions and conceptions readers will be permitted to know" (54). It is significant that within the first two novels, the narrators are characters

who are relating both events that took place in the past and, to a certain extent, information about their lives in the present. In other words, a majority of their narration is retrospective and the narratees only have access to the perceptions and conceptions of the narrators. Uri Margolin states that, “Retrospective reflection and commentary, assessing situations from the perspective of their end results, are both natural and well motivated for such a narrator. The *in situ* uncertainty of the narrative agents about the significance and subsequent implications of the situations in which they find themselves is replaced by the certain knowledge of the backward-looking narrator” (160). However, in these cases, even the ‘certain knowledge’ of the reflective narrators is limited to their own perspectives. In the final novel, the only one to feature a heterodiegetic, omniscient narrator, the narratee’s perspective is still limited by what the narrator chooses to reveal at certain points in the narrative.

The extensive use of anachronies throughout these three narratives directly relates to questions of time, absence, and presence. The female narrators must work through the past and make present those who are absent in order to understand the present situation of their lives. According to Paul Ricoeur:

Whether (historians) put their work under the sign of friendship or that of curiosity, they are all moved by the desire to do justice to the past. And their relationship to the past is first of all that of someone with an unpaid debt, in which they represent each of us who are readers of their work...They all seek to ‘render’ something, a landscape or a course of events. In this term ‘to render,’ I see the desire to ‘render its due’ to what is and to what once was (*Time and Narrative: Volume 3* 152).

In the introduction to *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative: Context and Contestation*, Morny Joy explains that “...Ricoeur relates the need for narrative as a mode of self-understanding to

a specific debt to the past. This issues from a growing awareness that our present identity can involve reclaiming lost heritages, whether personal or collective, that have not been allowed their impact on the stage of history...Narrative identity, on this reading, is not just a psychological construct, but a composite of detailed memory and re-evaluation” (xxvi). This so-called ‘debt to the past’ is especially relevant in *Secreta Penélope* and *Violetas para Olivia*. In the former, the narrator uses the process of narrative creation to create the presence of the already deceased Sara. It is as though the narrator feels she ‘owes’ Sara because she was unable or unwilling to help her while she was still alive. In fact, she even claims that, “La rememoración de la vida de Sara, de su personalidad, me ha afectado bastante, quizá más que el hecho de que esté muerta” (267) [The remembrance of Sara’s life, of her personality, has affected me greatly, possibly more than the fact that she’s dead]\*. In the latter, Madelaine must reconstruct the narrative identities of her ancestors to finally embrace the positive aspects of her heredity.

These narratives represent time not as strictly linear, but circular; they do not show the past as a stable, fixed time that can no longer influence the present and change the future. In the circularity of time, the past comes alive as something that is necessary to understand the present and create the future. The meaning the characters attribute to their own lives in the present moment of the narratives is based explicitly on the reworking and reexamination of the past. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the past is also always out of reach, on some level, which adds to the complicated narrative structure.

The structure of the narratives also requires one to extract meaning from the texts based on what is revealed about the past and when it is revealed within the fictive world. Ricoeur explains that the non-chronological representation of time in narratives should bring readers to reflect on their own temporality:

If it is true that the major tendency of modern theory of narrative...is to 'dechronologize' narrative, the struggle against the linear representation of time does not necessarily have as its sole outcome the turning of narrative into 'logic,' but rather may deepen its temporality. Chronology...does not have just one contrary, the a-chronology of laws or models. Its true contrary is temporality itself. Indeed it was necessary to confess what is other than time in order to be in a position to give full justice to human temporality and to propose not to abolish it but to probe deeper into it, to hierarchize it, and to unfold it following levels of temporalization that are less and less 'distended' and more and more 'held firmly...' (*Time and Narrative* 30)

Both the story and the discourse of the narratives encourage readers to perform the same reworking and reexamination of their own past, their own history, in order to open themselves to the multiple possibilities of meaning in their lives.

While specific absences have been discussed in detail in the previous chapters, there is one notable absence that exists in all three narratives that lies in what the narrators choose not to mention. Although each novel takes place during a period of rich political and social strife in Spain, there is virtually no mention of the specifics of the political struggle in any of them. Rather, the focus seems to be more on the personal and individual development of subjectivity than on repairing or recovering collective subjectivities. In other words, the concentration is primarily on mending the intrahistory of these women before they can even consider whether they want to be a part of the patriarchal history.

Beginning with a psychoanalytic reading of identity throughout these three texts, one can see a progression from the errors and ineffectiveness of the psychoanalytic construction of the subject, to an alternative construction of the subjective, to, finally, the need to mend the errors of the past in order to arrive at a positive construction of the subject.

In *Secreta Penélope*, Sara enters into psychoanalytic treatment on the advice of her friends. She undergoes rounds of conventional psychoanalytic therapy, all of which attempt to force her to abandon her rhizomatic existence dominated by the imaginary and accept the symbolic order and conform to the rules of society. Elizabeth Grosz explains that, “The patriarchal symbolic order leaves no space or form of representation for women’s autonomy...it places social constraints and systems of meaning on women’s behavior, through intimidation, threats, inscriptions, barriers – materially imposed on women which drive many to a possibly self-destructive hysteria” (*Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* 174). In her psychoanalytic treatment, Sara is not treated as an individual, but rather as a problem, a threat to society, that must be solved. It is inconceivable that she should be able to continue living in such a way that is considered unacceptable for a woman. Sara, not knowing how to live any other way and being unable to survive in this ‘patriarchal symbolic,’ finds no other choice than to end her own life.

On the other hand, in *Mi vida según Martín*, Violeta tries desperately to integrate herself into the symbolic order of language, to find some language with which she can construct and express her own subjectivity. When all of her attempts seem to fail, Violeta



must abandon her hopes of articulating herself through conventional, spoken language. Rather, she discovers a means of expression by using her body, her hands, to communicate through sign language. It is important to recognize, however, that Violeta does seem to find an alternative way to situate herself within the symbolic order in the story by essentially breaking down the traditional binary oppositions of mind versus body, speech versus writing, and even imaginary versus symbolic.

Madelaine's search for identity in *Violetas para Olivia* requires her to first reexamine and, in a way, correct the formerly constructed identities of her ancestors in the past before she can finally affirm her own subjectivity in the present. She must understand the ways in which her grandmother, Olivia, much like Sara from *Secreta Penélope*, was forced to repress her desires and conform to the patriarchal symbolic order of society. She must uncover how, when being unable to cope with the regulations of society, her mother, Inmaculada, was forced to break free from the societal constraints and find her own means of expressing her identity in order to survive.

The concepts of subjectivity and identity in these narratives are not, by any means, fixed nor stable. In fact, all three narratives call for a reformulation of how subjectivity and identity are defined. They demonstrate the ways in which the conventional dichotomies of mind/body, presence/absence, language/reality, among others, must be deconstructed in order to achieve a new definition of subjectivity. In the introduction to their book, *Material Feminisms*, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman explain that:

The strength of postmodern feminism is to reveal that since its inception, Western thought has been structured by a series of gendered dichotomies.

Postmodern feminists have argued that the male/female dichotomy informs all the dichotomies that ground Western thought: culture/nature, mind/body, subject/object, rational/emotional, and countless others. Postmodern feminists have further argued that it is imperative not to move from one side of the dichotomy to the other, to reverse the privileging of concepts, but to deconstruct the dichotomy itself, to move to an understanding that does not rest on oppositions (2).

By examining these three novels from a postmodern standpoint, one sees the dangers of subjectivity that is centered on these traditional binary oppositions as well as the ways in which modern women are beginning to deconstruct these dichotomies. What begins to emerge is a more positive, embodied construction of subjectivity.

In *Secreta Penélope*, Sara is presented as a woman who initially manages to exist outside the norms of society. She thrives on corporeal enjoyment and speaks openly about the pleasures she receives from her sexual encounters. She does not feel she is lacking anything in her rhizomatic existence. Once her friends intervene, however, she comes to represent a woman who is unable to escape the pressures forced upon her by society and thus exemplifies the problem with the conventional construction of the subject.<sup>2</sup> Her psychoanalytic treatment convinces her that she cannot survive in the imaginary and that she must incorporate herself into the symbolic order to escape the apparent chaos of her former life. Her subjectivity, and even her entire existence, becomes dependent upon her acceptance of the segmentarities of the symbolic, marriage, and motherhood. Unlike the traditional belief that a failure to transition to the symbolic will result in death, Sara's death comes directly as a result of her transition into the symbolic. It is the symbolic that causes her to lose her voice, to recognize some inherent

lack that she is never able to fulfill, and her inability to escape eventually leads her to take her own life.

Alaimo and Hekman continue in their introduction: “Although postmoderns claim to reject all dichotomies, there is one dichotomy that they appear to embrace almost without question: language/reality...postmodernists argue that the real/material is entirely constituted by language; what we call the real is a product of language and has its reality only in language” (2). Violeta, in *Mi vida según Martín*, successfully manages to deconstruct the dichotomies of both mind/body and language/reality in order to arrive at a subjectivity that is based on both/and rather than either/or.

Throughout the narrative, Violeta’s search for words and a narratee demonstrate her desperate attempt to fully incorporate herself into the symbolic order of language. At every turn, however, she is confronted with the material, embodied world. Although she communicates with Baptiste Barat primarily through writing, their communication depends upon their weekly, in-person meetings. She struggles in her relationship with her husband, Luis, because of his passion for engineering and materials. Edouard fails to serve as a narratee when their relationship becomes strictly sexual (embodied). Her son, Tomás, cannot participate in the world of language as she hopes, as he is born deaf. Finally, she believes she has managed to escape material reality when she begins her correspondence with Martín, who she never meets in person. Eventually, however, through her increased interaction with her son in the embodied world of sign language, Violeta comes to realize that language does not need to be separated from embodied reality.

In the article, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” Karen Barad argues that:

A performative understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things. Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real. Hence, in ironic contrast to the misconception that would equate performativity with a form of linguistic monism that takes language to be the stuff of reality, performativity is actually a contestation of the unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve (121).

For Violeta, it is the performativity and embodiment of communicating through sign language that allows her to move beyond the excessive power she has granted words and language in determining her own subjectivity.

In *Violetas para Olivia*, Madelaine’s reconstruction of subjectivity is dependent upon her embodied experiences located in both space and time. She must physically return to San Gabriel, allow herself to live through the embodied memories of her past, and open herself to the blurring lines between the past, present, and future in order to arrive at a positive, alternative construction of her own subjectivity. Central to understanding Madelaine’s transformation is Braidotti’s work, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, in which Braidotti argues in favor of “Redesigning subjectivity as a process of becoming nomad” (5). She states that, “A nomadic vision of the body defines it as multifunctional and complex...Complexity is the key to understanding the multiple affective layers, complex

temporal variables, and internally contradictory time and memory lines that frame our embodied existence” (25).

Prior to returning to San Gabriel, Madelaine rejected everything her family represented – wealth, class, power, and corruption. She attempted to escape what she believed was the curse of the Martínez Durango family. When she does return, however, she is thrust into an environment that forces her to experience the embodiment of her memories, and in an almost supernatural manner, to embody her ancestors. On two distinct occasions, Madelaine seems to physically become Olivia.

The first time this occurs is in the kitchen with José Luis, when Madelaine is overcome with the desire to kiss him for the first time: “Madelaine miró a José Luis con un extraño brillo en los ojos. Él sintió la atracción, el deseo irreprimible. La transformación de sí mismo en otra persona mucho más visceral, incapaz de ordenar ni mucho menos controlar sus instintos. Madelaine se aproximó a él...Y ella le besó. Olivia. Madelaine. Madelaine. Olivia...” (163) [Madelaine looked at José Luis with a strange sparkle in her eyes. He felt the attraction, the irrepressible desire. The transformation of herself into another person, much more visceral, unable to arrange, much less control, her instincts. Madelaine drew closer to him...and kissed him. Olivia. Madelaine. Madelaine. Olivia...]\*. The narrator explains that, “...Madelaine empezaba a entender. Y aunque aquello era una locura, algo inexplicable para cualquier cabeza racional, había abierto la puerta a un statu quo de vidas y vivencias superpuestas sin divisiones temporales” (163-4) [Madelaine began to understand. And although it was crazy, something inexplicable for any rational mind, a door had opened to a status quo of lives and experiences

overlapped without temporal divisions]\*. The second incident occurs after Madelaine is intimate with Álvaro. She is wearing one of Olivia's dresses and asks Álvaro to describe her with his eyes closed. He responds: "Misteriosa, apasionada, caprichosa, inolvidable, elegante, fría, virgin, rubia..." [Mysterious, passionate, capricious, unforgettable, elegant, cold, virgin, blond...]\*. Madelaine interrupts him, pointing out that he mentioned blond, "...y también virgin, lo cual siento decirte no soy, y me temo que no me caracteriza mi elegancia ni mi frivolidad. Tampoco, espero, mi frialdad. Creo que le acabas de hacer el amor a mi abuela" (279) [...and also virgin, which I'm sorry to tell you I'm not, and I'm afraid I'm not characterized by my my elegance or frivolity. Nor, I hope, my coldness. I believe that you just made love to my grandmother]\*.

These embodied experiences, along with her own embodied memories, allow Madelaine to finally embrace the multiplicity of her subjectivity. Braidotti explains that, "As a figuration of contemporary subjectivity...the nomad is a post-metaphysical, intensive, multiple entity, functioning in a net of interconnections. She cannot be reduced to a linear, teleological form of subjectivity, but is rather the site of multiple connections" (66). Once she accepts this, Madelaine is able to transform the location of power afforded to the Martínez Durango women into something affirmative, which will in turn provide a positive legacy to pass on to her own children in the future.

In an effort to summarize the significance of this new group of women writers in Spain, one must return to the question of intrahistory versus history. While former groups of writers seemed to focus more on the inclusion of women in history, this new group tends to focus more on mending the intrahistories of women. Only then can women

reflect on their role in history and decide whether or not they wish to return to it. Essentially, the characters within these novels manage to deterritorialize the segmentarity of history. By exploring, instead, the intrahistories, these women are able to expose the issues of the patriarchal, logocentric definitions of subjectivity in order to argue in favor of a more embodied, multiple, and positive definition of subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thinkers who have explained the difference between history and intrahistory include Miguel de Unamuno, Américo Castro, and José Jiménez Lozano.

<sup>2</sup> In *The Archaeology of Knowledge, The Birth of the Clinic, and Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault considers the subject as the result of the domination imposed by the forces of power.

<sup>3</sup> The logocentric definitions of subjectivity were criticized by Derrida from a deconstructive perspective.

## EPILOGUE

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to uncover the ways in which truth, meaning, and selfhood are presented in three 21<sup>st</sup> century Spanish narratives written by women. Broadly speaking, these novels portray truth as something that is purely subjective, and as such, always out of reach. Meaning is constructed through both absence and presence, and is based on reworking and reexamining the past. The concept of selfhood, finally, must be reconceptualized in order to achieve a more embodied, multiple, and positive consideration of subjectivity.

In *Secreta Penélope*, the narrator strives to find meaning behind Sara's suicide. While much of the information surrounding her friend's untimely death comes directly from the narrator's experiences and observations, she admits ignorance of certain significant events and details and must therefore rely on the narrations she receives from mutual friends and family of the victim. There are also times when she consciously chooses to believe certain things and decides not to investigate them further. Essentially, she creates the meaning she so desires by reworking and reexamining Sara's past based on her own subjective perspective in the present.

This is the only novel in which the concepts of meaning and selfhood are not directly related to one another. Here, the struggle with selfhood can be seen as one of the main factors contributing to Sara's suicide. For so many years, she lived happily in her rhizomatic existence, dominated by the imaginary where she was driven by the chaotic, pleasure-seeking impulses of the id. She did not appear to have a problem until her friends, society, and the psychoanalysts declared there was one. Unfortunately, for Sara,



she is unable to survive in this patriarchal symbolic, which eventually leads her to take her own life. And although the narrator writes about Sara, of Sara, and, in a sense, for Sara, Sara is dead; she is absent from the present moment of the story; she can no longer speak for herself.

In *Mi vida según Martín*, Violeta searches for someone to whom she can tell her story and the language with which to do it in order to find meaning in her own life. Her quest reflects the exigency that exists for women to move beyond the conventional notions of identity construction in order to discover their own unique alternatives. Throughout the narrative trajectory, Violeta struggles against the excessive power she has granted language and words in determining her subjectivity. Eventually, however, she discovers that the conventional binaries of presence/absence, mind/body, and language/reality are no longer sufficient in the construction of meaning. Rather, she must learn how to construct meaning based on presence AND absence, mind AND body, language AND reality in order to finally embrace a lived, embodied reality.

*Violetas para Olivia* demonstrates the ways in which the meaning of one's experiences and one's subjectivity are constructed by narrative and are constantly dependent upon and reconstructed by subjective interpretation. Throughout Madelaine's quest to uncover the secrets surrounding the illustrious Martínez Durango family, she must learn to read the narratives of her ancestors in a new way in order to finally find meaning in her life and embrace the multiplicity and embodiment of her own subjectivity. In other words, she must redefine the formerly constructed identities of her ancestors in the past before she can finally affirm her own subjectivity in the present.

Considering the lack of academic research surrounding these three novels, there are many themes and topics yet to be studied. For example, the concept of secrets is featured predominately in all three novels, the significance of which is certainly worth exploring. In addition, I hope to have the opportunity to more closely examine the ways in which the settings of each novel represent the psychological evolution of the characters. In more general terms, future research on the socio-economic position in Spain, feminism, and comparing and contrasting these narratives with those of the more recent past would also be a valuable addition to Spanish literary studies.

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# ABSTRACT

## CRITICAL APPROACHES TO NARRATIVE TRAJECTORIES IN 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY SPANISH NOVELS BY WOMEN

by

COLLEEN GRANT

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**Advisor:** Dr. Francisco Higuero

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This dissertation aims to uncover from a critical perspective the ways in which several concepts are presented in three 21<sup>st</sup> century Spanish narratives written by women: *Secreta Penélope* by Alicia Giménez Bartlett, *Mi vida según Martín* by Sara Barrena, and *Violetas para Olivia* by Julia Montejo. Following an introductory chapter, each novel will be examined individually before exploring the significance of all three novels together. The main theoretical approaches used throughout this study include narratology, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and postmodernism.

The investigation will begin by seeking to answer the following question: What are the main elements of the narratives, and how do these elements come together to produce meaning? In other words, it will begin with a narratological examination of the form and function of the narratives. Upon further analysis, one finds that meaning cannot be constructed merely based on what is present. There are a number of notable absences from the texts, as well, which all contribute to the creation of meaning. It is here that a deconstructive reading of the works based on Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance* is

essential. Moving into an even deeper examination of the narratives, this work will investigate the ways in which the characters try to construct their own identities according to – and at times differently from – traditional psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity. In addition, the novels will also be examined from a postmodern viewpoint in an attempt to demonstrate the ways in which the traditional dichotomies of, for example, mind/body, presence/absence, language/reality are deconstructed. All three narratives call for a reformulation of how subjectivity and identity are defined. Through such an examination, one begins to see the dangers of subjectivity that is centered on these traditional binary oppositions as well as the ways in which modern women are beginning to deconstruct these dichotomies.

After thorough examination, one finds that these narratives portray truth as something that is purely subjective, and as such, always out of reach. Meaning is constructed through both absence and presence, and is based on reworking and reexamining the past. The concept of selfhood, finally, must be reconceptualized in order to achieve a more embodied, multiple, and positive consideration of subjectivity.

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

After completing my Bachelor's Degree in Spanish Language at Oakland University in 2008, I began my graduate studies at Wayne State University. I received a Master's Degree in Spanish Language and Culture with a concentration in Golden Age Spanish Literature in 2011 before beginning a PhD program with a concentration in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Spanish Literature. Throughout my studies at Wayne State University, I have received many honors and awards that have greatly contributed to my success, including: the Thomas C. Rumble University Graduate Fellowship, the King-Chavez-Parks Future Faculty Fellowship, a Graduate Teaching Assistantship, and the Roslyn and Marvin Schindler Excellence in Teaching Award for Graduate Students. I also served as the president of the Graduate Forum and continued teaching as part-time faculty after the completion of my assistantship. In addition to my work within the department, I have presented papers at various conferences, including the CMLLC Graduate Student Conference at Wayne State University, the Pennsylvania Foreign Language Conference at Duquesne University, and the Carolina Conference for Romance Studies at the University of North Carolina.